

Theological Fatalism Equivocates: A Defense of Ockhamism

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In this essay, I argue that theological fatalism is false because it equivocates what will happen with what must happen. I make an Ockhamist argument about free will and divine foreknowledge to prove this. The paper proceeds as follows: I explain the theological fatalism argument, then the Ockhamist interpretation of the second premise, and then define free will. I then craft an Ockhamist argument, apply the distinction between “can” and “will” in the argument to disprove theological fatalism, and then defend Ockhamism against common critiques.

Theological Fatalism

Theological fatalism asserts that divine foreknowledge and free will are incompatible. This argument has been considered by many different theologians and logicians over time, but it was recently and forcefully posed again by Nelson Pike. His formulation was translated into logical form by Linda Zagzebski for Stanford’s *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Below is her formulation. In it, she uses the term *T*, which stands for “you will answer the telephone tomorrow at 9 am.”

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- (1) Yesterday God infallibly believed *T*. [Supposition of infallible foreknowledge]
 - (2) If *E* occurred in the past, it is now-necessary that *E* occurred then. [Principle of the Necessity of the Past]
 - (3) It is now-necessary that yesterday God believed *T*. [1, 2]
 - (4) Necessarily, if yesterday God believed *T*, then *T*. [Definition of “infallibility”]
 - (5) If *p* is now-necessary, and necessarily ($p \rightarrow q$), then *q* is now-necessary. [Transfer of Necessity Principle]
 - (6) So, it is now-necessary that *T*. [3,4,5]
 - (7) If it is now-necessary that *T*, then you cannot do otherwise than answer the telephone tomorrow at 9 am. [Definition of “necessary”]
 - (8) Therefore, you cannot do otherwise than answer the telephone tomorrow at 9 am. [6,7]
 - (9) If you cannot do otherwise when you do an act, you do not act freely. [Principle of Alternate Possibilities]
 - (10) Therefore, when you answer the telephone tomorrow at 9 am, you will not do it freely. [8,9]
- (Zagzebski)

This argument is reframed several times by Zagzebski, but none of her other versions of the argument are substantially different, and all versions are discredited by the Ockhamist solution as presented in this paper. All versions of the Zagzebski argument rely on cause, and it is the mishandling of this idea that leads to the equivocation. Because the above formulation of the argument relies on cause more subtly than the other versions do, its equivocation is the most subtle. By showing how this argument equivocates between its premises, it will be obvious to the reader how other forms of the argument also commit this same equivocation in their premises.

The Ockhamist Solution

Generally, the Ockhamist solution rejects premise (2) of Zagzebski’s argument. The phrase it rejects reads “it is now-necessary that *E* occurred then.” Ockhamism focuses on the idea of necessity; it argues that the past is not necessary in the sense the argument claims. Specifically, the past may be fixed, but that it is not always necessarily fixed in a way that eliminates free will (Plantinga 244). I will elaborate on this during my argument.

Sometimes, Ockhamists seem to say that the past is not necessary at all; they claim that certain facts about the past may change.¹ This is certainly true if the fact about the past is not really about the past; World War I was the largest war ever, until World War II. So, the statement “World War I was the largest war ever” was true in the past, and false later. But the number of people who died cannot change. We can call that fact about the past necessary because there is no accessible world where that would not have been the case.

The Ockhamist position is often reduced to absurdity by those who think that it claims that God’s beliefs are somehow not in the past.² Ockhamists do not need to take this position; they may instead take the position that this part of the past is not necessary.³ In some cases, the Ockhamist argues that there are accessible worlds in which the past was different. These seem to run counter to intuitions that the past *cannot* change, but given that all of these are counterfactual possibilities, the past *does not* change. It is this distinction between “can” and “does,” or “cannot” or “will not,” upon which I argue that successful Ockhamism hinges. I regard failure to distinguish between these two ideas to be as fallacious as failure to distinguish between “ought” and “is.”

Regarding the Definition of Free Will

There are a multiplicity of ways to define free will. In this essay, I will define free will as the capacity of agents to access more than one possible world. I think this definition matches what many would intuitively take free will to be. However, intuitions may not always be specific enough for a philosopher, and it does seem that the idea of ‘capacity to access’ is vague. I will try to illustrate this idea by an example.

Let us say that I have a cell phone that decides which contacts I have, and I cannot dial the number of anyone not on my contacts list. Let us say that I must make a call. If I only have one contact, I only have access to one possibility. I would not have free will in that case. Say that I have one thousand contacts, and I would equally enjoy calling any of them. I think everyone would agree that I have free will in that instance. Now let us say I have only two contacts; the person I most want to call in the world and the person I would least like to call. It may be the case that I may not feel that

¹See De Florio et al. for an example of this view.

²I read Fischer and Patrick as doing this in their joint essay.

³See De Florio et al. and Plantinga for examples of this position.

I have options, but I do have access to multiple contacts. I therefore have free will, by my definition.

However, incompatibilists may cry foul at this definition.⁴ I have explicitly chosen not to couch my definition in terms of determinism and indeterminism to try and avoid this conflict. My definition of free will is unlike the following definitions: “free will is the ability to do what the past and the laws of nature determine what you will do” and “free will is the ability to act in a way that cannot be predicted.” I reject the notion that an action that can be predicted with perfect soundness is unfree, and with equal strength I reject that the past and the laws of nature determine in all instances a unique future, though I do accept that God perceives a unique future. Similarly, the idea that an action cannot be foreknown unless it is unfree is really an epistemic argument, one which seems extremely dubious as applied to God. In responding to criticisms of Ockhamism, I shall consider different models of foreknowledge that more particularly address the epistemic claim.

A Defense of the Ockhamist Solution

Below is my construction of an Ockhamist argument. Any number of arguments could be considered Ockhamist; this is merely mine.

- (1) If agents have access to several possible worlds, free will exists. [Definition of free will]
- (2) Agents with access to several possible worlds can choose any one of them. [Definition of possible]
- (3) Agents with access to several possible worlds will only choose one. [Definition of choice]
- (4) If agents have access to several possible worlds, they can choose any one of them and will only choose one of them. [2,3]
- (5) The possible world that agents will choose is the future. [Definition of future]
- (6) If all things, including the future, are known, there is an omniscient being. [Definition of omniscience]
- (7) To know the future is to know what world will come to pass. [Definition of knowledge]

⁴See van Inwagen in works consulted.

- (8) If, as well as the past and the present, the world that will come to pass is known, an omniscient being exists. [6,7]
- (9) Ideas are compatible if they do not entail a logical contradiction.
- (10) The following ideas do not contradict: There are agents with access to several possible worlds which they can choose and of which they will choose only one, AND the past, present, and future of the world is known. [Definitions of can and will]
- (11) Therefore, if an omniscient being exists, its existence would be compatible with free will. [1,6,9,10]

Perhaps this may be a bit clunky, but it is straightforward enough for my purposes. The argument concludes that free will and omniscience are compatible. All the premises follow from definitions, conjunctions, or modus ponens. None of it seems particularly unintuitive. However, premise (10) clearly does some heavy lifting in the argument. I think the commonsense definitions of the terms make premise (10) follow quite intuitively. However, I imagine that it may not be sufficiently clear to seem intuitive to others.

I believe that premise (10) is nothing more than a refutation of what I shall call the fatalistic fallacy. The justification I offered for premise (10) was the definitions of “can,” and “will.” I think that a fine distinction between the ideas of ability and choice, captured in the words “can” and “will” is precisely what is lacking in all arguments for fatalism. Logical fatalism conflates “will” and “cannot do otherwise than.” The fatalist says: I will make a certain choice; therefore, I cannot do otherwise. If choice is assumed not to exist except as our ability to do what we are determined to do, this follows, but that is precisely what fatalistic arguments purport to prove, so it is a question-begging notion. Of course, “can” may be defined in a particularly restrictive way as well; if you will do something, you cannot do otherwise in a certain sense, though certainly not in the sense that you are unable. It is a situation where you choose not. This definition of “can” seems very convoluted.

I think that “can,” and “cannot do otherwise,” need to be defined in terms of access to possible worlds. Here, I will rely heavily on the logic David Lewis relies on for his argument for time travel against the fixity

of the past.⁵ Let us say that I will eat steak tonight. God knows it. He has foreseen it. I sit down to eat the steak. Do I have access to worlds where I do not eat the steak? In what sense do I not? Can I not throw the steak out the window, or in the trash? My arms have the strength, my mind can conceive of the idea. It seems like I could push the steak to the floor as easily as eat it. Yet, I will eat it. Not only does God know it; anyone who knows my feelings about steak knows it. One could make some argument about how my frame of mind controls me; my feelings about steak leave me no choice. Yet, as Lewis argues, just as we would construct a whole host of reasons to attempt to bar options from the time traveler which we would not to a non-time traveler, all these reasons are post hoc. They have nothing to do with God's foreknowledge at all. The truth is that there is simply no sense in which I cannot do otherwise because I have access to a world in which I do otherwise. That I will do something is insufficient to entail that I cannot do otherwise.

The Equivocation of Theological Fatalism

The equivocation of theological fatalism is that it confuses the idea that a certain future will exist with the idea that no future other than that certain one could exist, what I called the fatalistic fallacy above. This will point to the equivocation in the argument. Consider premises (6) and (7):

- (6) So, it is now-necessary that *T*. [3,4,5]
- (7) If it is now-necessary that *T*, then you cannot do otherwise than answer the telephone tomorrow at 9 am. [Definition of "necessary"]

The equivocation lies in the word necessary. Does the word necessary mean "cannot do otherwise than" or "will"? Certainly, necessary can mean both things. "It is necessary that we shop today," conveys no inevitability, whereas "necessarily, the claim cannot be both true and false," seems to leave no alternate possibility. I do not deny that necessary would seem to imply "cannot do otherwise than" in a typical logical sense; I would deny that necessity which implies "cannot do otherwise than" is true of premise (2). If "necessary" only means "will," then premise (7) does not follow by the definition of necessary. Let us assume the argument is valid. Thus,

⁵Pages 149–151 of Lewis' "Paradoxes of Time Travel" all concern his lengthy thought experiment, which I model my points after.

- (2) If E occurred in the past, it is now-necessary that E occurred then.

(2) seems to imply that what happened in the past “could not otherwise than” have occurred, simply because it occurred. The fact that things happened a certain way does not mean that they could not have happened another way. Perhaps the fatalist will argue that the “now” aspect of the now-necessary rescues them. Even if the past “could” have occurred differently, it is not the case that it “can now” have occurred differently. Perhaps this is valid. Let us look further.

- (4) Necessarily, if yesterday God believed T , then T .
[Definition of “infallibility”]
- (5) If p is now-necessary, and necessarily ($p \rightarrow q$), then q is now-necessary.

We will break down (4) and (5) and then discover our problem. (4) states that if God believed T , then T will happen. Agreed. (5) states that if God cannot have done otherwise than believe T , which is true in virtue of his belief belonging to the past, then if it cannot be otherwise than that if God believes T that T will happen, then T will necessarily happen. But where have we proved that “it cannot be otherwise than that if God believes T , T will happen?” We have $p \rightarrow q$, if God believes it then it will happen, but we do not have necessarily $p \rightarrow q$, that it cannot otherwise than happen. We have jumped from “will” to “cannot be otherwise than,” and committed the fatalistic fallacy, in these two premises. The fact that it is so hard to see is why I call it an equivocation. Yet some may say that my objection is unintuitive; how can “will” and “cannot do otherwise than” mean something else here? For me, it seems like pointing out the error is enough, but for those who do not accept that it is, I will detail some troubling implications of theological fatalism, which should cast doubt on whether my objection is less intuitive than theological fatalism itself.

Troubling Implications of Theological Fatalism

The purpose of this section is to indicate that rejections of my above argument based on its perhaps unintuitive nature are unsupported. I will first say that if there is a logical refutation of an argument, philosophers should regard it as refuted. However, I think sometimes our inability to wrap our minds around certain refutations may make us wish to reject them. I here argue that theological fatalism leads us to conclude many things which we will not wish to accept, which will perhaps make my argument more palatable. Let us engage in two conditional proofs. We will first make a few assumptions, and I will center the premises for clarity:

- (1) Theological fatalism is true.

We will never close that assumption, but understand all other claims as working within it.

- (2) An omniscient God exists.

Understanding the definition of both of these terms, we easily arrive at:

- (3) Free will does not exist. [1,2]

That seems fairly evident from the premises. I will now add premises that I believe are intuitive.

- (4) If agentive causation exists, then free will exists.
 (5) If an omniscient God exists, then chance does not exist.
 (6) Events may be caused by agents, the laws of nature and the past, or chance.

By modus tollens of both 3 & 4, and 2 & 5, we receive:

- (7) Agentive causation does not exist.
 (8) Chance causation does not exist.
 (9) Events are caused by the laws of nature and the past. [7,8]

We will now close the first assumption and then perform an operation on it:

- (10) If an omniscient God exists, then events are caused by the laws of nature and the past.
 (11) If events are caused by anything other than the laws of nature and the past, an omniscient God does not exist. [10]⁶

This seems like it should be pretty obviously false. This seems to suggest that if an action was caused by something other than a deterministic process, God could not possibly foreknow it. As I stated above, this seems epistemically dubious, and I will address it later. For those that do not find that idea sufficiently unintuitive to admit that the preference of the theological fatalism argument is problematic, I will add one more intuition and bring back a previous one and see what comes of it.

- (12) If God exists, God is an agent.

⁶Some may feel I engaged in a sort of misdirection there, because the theological fatalism problem says nothing about causation. I argue that it does; Zagzebski creates other constructions of the argument to avoid temporality responses like the Boethian solution, and these rely on causation.

- (13) If agentive causation exists, then free will exists.
- (14) Therefore, if God exists, God does not cause things to be.

I do not even know what to make of a God whose existence would entail that all things are caused by the past and the laws of nature, yet which cannot cause things to be. This seems to fly in the face of reason in a profound way. It seems clear that we ought to prefer some rejection of this argument, though one that does not make similarly absurd claims.

Defenses of Ockhamism Against Common Criticisms

Many critics have argued that Ockhamism defies our notions of the fixity of the past, but this argument rests on a misconception. They argue that while some things which are about the past depend on the relative future (for example, the Declaration of Independence was written 11 years before the United States Constitution, but that was less true, in some sense, at the time of writing), God's beliefs should not. After all, while these claims are about the past in relation to the future, God's beliefs can be regarded as existing entirely in the past, even if his beliefs are about the future. I do not know what type of mistake they are making, not in the sense that I could label it a category mistake or something else. I do believe they are restricting the idea of the fixity of the past. Particularly, I think that their understanding of the relationship between time and truth is limited; they assume that there is only one sense in which the present can depend on the future.

To illustrate this, I will focus on a certain term that has been used in response to Ockhamism, the idea of "soft facts."⁷ Soft facts are facts which are not strictly true for a time. For example, when the Declaration of Independence was written, it was a soft fact that the United States Constitution would be written eleven years later. Now we consider the number of years between the two a hard fact, because we cannot change it, before the Constitution was written it was a soft fact, which could have been altered by changes in events.

Philosophical opponents have argued that Ockhamism tries to make God's foreknowledge a soft fact, but I think this is a misunderstanding. The term "soft fact" is a bad term for understanding the unique way that God's beliefs depend on the future. Part of the problem is that the definition of a soft fact, namely that it depends in some way on the future

⁷See Adams, Merricks, and Patrick for more on soft facts.

to be true, is very vague. The other part of the problem is that whenever examples are given, they inevitably are of conditions which are not really about the events of a given time period, but about how the events of a given time period do not become true in the future. I do not assert that God's beliefs are like these time period examples at all; the beliefs are true at the moment that he has them. Instead, God's beliefs depend on the future because the future itself is known to him in the past, and it is God's vision of the future that creates the belief. That unique element makes God's foreknowledge a hard fact. Some object to this type of dependence; Patrick says that knowledge cannot depend on the future itself, because "belief just isn't like this" (842). And in the case of a being who doesn't have any way to foreknow the future, I believe he would be right.

Certain features of the past existing because of the future is a simple enough thing to understand in deterministic senses. If we stand on train tracks and a short distance away is a runaway train that is barreling towards us, we know the future, or at least we think we do. There appears to be a deterministic sign that the train will occupy the space in front of us, because the laws of the universe work in such a way that such must be the case. Hopefully, we would all dive off of the tracks in such an instance. In some sense, the train barreling towards us is no present threat; it is a future one. Our diving off the tracks occurs in the past, relative to the train going over where we once stood. We are not accustomed to thinking about the past reacting to the future, but we can react to signs of the future. There are two important, related ways that this metaphor is not analogous to God's beliefs: God's beliefs are infallible, and God's knowledge of the future is based on the future itself, not on some deterministic signs detected in the present. These differences have nothing to do, however, with whether the past is actually fixed or not. Indeed, Ockhamism makes no problematic statements about this idea.

To say that God sees the future and thus knows what it is in no way suggests that the past can be changed after the fact. Not any more than we can change the fact that we leaped out of the train's path. In both cases, the reality of the past had to do with beliefs held about the future. There is nothing unintuitive about people holding certain beliefs, now in this past, because of their perceptions of the future. However, as mentioned, there seems to be something very different in God's perception of the future, given its infallibility. So, having established that Ockhamism does not make the argument that the past can be changed, even if it in some ways depends on the future, we can turn to another important aspect of Ockhamism: its conception of divine foreknowledge.

Divine foreknowledge can be a bit of a troubling issue, because in some ways it is very mysterious, yet the whole theological fatalism argument

can hinge on its definition. Rarely do philosophers delve into *how* God knows everything, yet this may be crucial.⁸ For example, if the only way God could know everything were to control everything, i.e. his will shapes the universe and that is how he knows the universe, then obviously there is no human free will. I will refer to this as the coercive model. Alternatively, perhaps God's omniscience stems from a perfect understanding of the past and the laws of nature. This may have allowed him to predict, or project the future without experiencing it directly. However, this seems to suggest that God could not have divine foreknowledge in a non-deterministic universe, or one with agentive causation, creating problems for anyone who cannot accept both free will and determinism. This might be described as a predictive model, as we make predictions about deterministic processes in much the same way, even if we do so less comprehensively. This shows that some formulations of divine foreknowledge create problems without needing the entire theological fatalism argument.

Alternatively, other ideas of divine foreknowledge seem more friendly to free will, though some may be hard to accept. The best example of an idea which is both problematic and compatible with free will is the idea that God is an eternally lucky guesser, who just happens to predict everything right but who could guess wrong at any moment. This would be something of a "weak-infallibility" model, because although God never is wrong, he can be.⁹ I think that many will have theological objections to such a model. A more palatable thought experiment is that God is a divine time traveler, who has witnessed the future and returned as a spectator. Some philosophers find the idea of time travel problematic in this scenario; if history were rewound, or someone were to go back in time and view history over again, some may argue that exact repetitions of previous iterations would prove that there is no free will.¹⁰ However, this depends on what is meant by free will; only definitions of free will that rely on chance will maintain that agents are not free if they react to the same situation in the same way any number of times. After all, I may over the course of my life encounter the same situation repeatedly and always respond the same way to it; say I always accept free money when it is offered. Does that mean I

⁸For a philosopher that does, see Hunt. His exploration of what omniscience leads him to conclude that theological fatalism may rest on an equivocation, depending "on what the problem of theological fatalism is taken to be," but he does not identify the same equivocation which I do (163).

⁹An interesting argument is made on this subject by Rockwood, who makes the same will/cannot otherwise than distinction regarding God's knowledge (104).

¹⁰I believe van Inwagen's arguments may imply as much.

do not have access to worlds in which I don't accept free money? Of course it doesn't. Thus, if free will is based on access to possible worlds, it doesn't follow that acting the same way repeatedly restricts free will. In fact, it is hard to think that a person possesses a will at all if they choose to access different worlds under exactly the same (including temporally identical) circumstances. I believe that a time-traveling model of God could preserve free will and ensure omniscience. However, most people do not think of God as a divine time traveler, so perhaps this is not a particularly fruitful way of thinking of the issue.

Usually, God is thought of as "seeing" the future, though in an entirely comprehensive sense (Pike 30). This could be referred to as the foresight perspective. This perspective may be criticized on the grounds that it is the least clear with regards to a mechanism; it does not purport to explain how God sees the future. It is possible that if a mechanism were articulated, it could perhaps be a type of timeline violation, the way that time travel is. But since God merely views the future instead of going there, I do not believe that would be the case.

A comparison of the foresight model to the other shows its obvious advantages. Let us compare it to the first two models, which preclude free will. It does not rely on coercion. Nor does it rely on predictions based on deterministic signs in the present; it relies on seeing the future directly. We often refer to making strong predictions about deterministic processes as "foreseeing," but that is not what is meant by the foresight model. Now we will compare it to the compatible but unintuitive models. The foresight model is infallible in a strong sense; it is not that God is not wrong about the future, it is that he cannot be. Lastly, it probably does not involve history playing itself over twice; the future that God views is not one a previous future that will repeat, but the actual future. So, this model seems to dodge the disadvantages of the other models, and an incompatibilist can accept that theological fatalism does not prevent free will.

Conclusion

Theological fatalism fails for the same reason logical fatalism fails; one cannot prove by the fact that a certain world was accessed that no other possible world was accessible. I have created an argument, which would be considered Ockhamist, that argues for the compatibility of free will and divine foreknowledge. I have also shown that theological fatalism leads to unintuitive conclusions and defended Ockhamism against criticisms. In so doing, I believe that I have proved that theological fatalism is false if free will relies on access to possible worlds.

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