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No (New) Troubles with Ockhamism

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1. Introduction

There is a well-known tension between divine foreknowledge and the freedom to do otherwise—a tension that has led many philosophers of religion to declare the two incompatible. Typically, the dialectic between these theological incompatibilists and their compatibilist opponents begins with some version of the standard argument for incompatibilism, which was first formalized by Nelson Pike in 1965.[1] According to the standard argument, if it is true that Jones (for example) will mow his

[1] Nelson Pike, "Divine Omniscience and Voluntary Action," *Philosophical Review*, (Jan. 1965) 74, 1: 27–46. Pike's argument has been poked, prodded, and tweaked by a host of writers. William Hasker's reconstruction, as found in his "Foreknowledge and Necessity," in John Martin Fischer, ed., *God, Foreknowledge, and Freedom* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1989), 216–57, is particularly good (although we have changed the characters somewhat):

(1) It is now true that Jones will mow his lawn tomorrow. (premise)
(2) It is impossible that God should at any time believe what is false, or fail to believe anything that is true. (premise: divine omniscience)
(3) Therefore, God has always believed that Jones will mow his lawn tomorrow. (1, 2)
(4) If God has always believed a certain thing, it is not in anyone's power to bring it about that God has not always believed it. (premise: the fixity of the past)
(5) Therefore, it is not in Jones's power to bring it about that God has not always believed that he would mow the lawn. (3, 4)
(6) It is not possible for it to be true both that God has always believed that Jones would mow the lawn, and that he does not in fact mow the lawn. (from 2)
(7) Therefore, it is not in Jones's power to refrain from mowing the lawn tomorrow. (5, 6) So Jones's mowing the lawn tomorrow is not an act of free choice.

lawn tomorrow, then it is a fact about the past that God believed that Jones would mow his lawn tomorrow.[2] Thus, if Jones were to refrain from mowing his lawn, then he would have to change that fact about the past. But the past is fixed, which means that nobody can change it; so Jones is not free to refrain from mowing his lawn. According to the Ockhamist, this traditional incompatibilist argument fails because God's beliefs are "soft facts" about the past, and thus in some sense alterable.[3]

David Widerker has challenged this Ockhamist move,[4] offering a "general objection to any sort of Ockhamist attempt to reconcile divine foreknowledge with human freedom by treating facts about God's foreknowledge of future contingent events as soft facts about the past over which agents may have power."[5] Widerker presents a scenario in which God's past knowledge of some event that will occur in the future sets off a "future-contingent causal chain" leading up to the occurrence of the event. Each of the events in this chain is connected to the next event by virtue of being a causally necessary condition for its occurrence. Moreover, most of the past events in this future-contingent causal chain appear to constitute hard facts about the past. And if such facts truly are hard facts, then this is a problem for the Ockhamist—because it implies that an agent has the ability to alter the fact that God knows that a future event will occur only if the agent has an ability to alter a hard fact about the past (e.g. one of the events that together constitute the future-contingent causal chain). Whether or not some of God's beliefs are in some sense alterable, it seems that no agent has the ability to alter a *hard* fact about the past.

We take this argument to de-emphasize the question of whether God's beliefs are soft, and focus instead on past facts that are more widely accepted as hard. For if our ability to do otherwise requires altering a fact about the past that is clearly a hard fact, then Ockhamism fails *even if* God's past beliefs are soft. In this paper, we claim that Widerker's argument from

[2] Of course, from God's perspective at the relevant time in the past, the content of his belief would be future-tensed: "Jones will mow his lawn tomorrow."

[3] Although it is more precise to say that "facts about God's beliefs" are soft (or hard) facts, we will occasionally just say that God's beliefs themselves are soft (or hard) facts.

[4] David Widerker, "Troubles with Ockhamism," *Journal of Philosophy*, 87, 9 (Sep. 1990): 462–80.

[5] Widerker (1990), pp. 474–5.

future-contingent causal chains, thus construed, is unsuccessful. More generally, our claim is that the incompatibilist who takes Widerker's line cannot avoid the debates over the softness of God's beliefs after all, and hence has not succeeded in providing a general objection to the Ockhamist move.

As we attempt to establish this thesis, we will first say a little more (in §2) about the distinction between hard and soft facts. We will then consider (§3) Widerker's argument. We think that his argument falls prey to a dilemma, which we develop in §4. We then turn (§5) to a related argument from Peter van Inwagen,[6] and criticize his argument (§6) by applying the dilemma developed in response to Widerker. In §7 we tie up some loose ends regarding the connection between soft facthood and entailment. We conclude (§8) by offering a summary of the dialectic.

2. The Distinction between Hard and Soft Facts

The Ockhamist contends that our ability to do otherwise is not endangered by God's foreknowledge because facts about God's past beliefs regarding future contingents are soft facts about the past. Two assumptions should help to clarify this distinction between hard and soft facts. First, hard facts are *temporally non-relational*, whereas soft facts are *temporally relational*. A fact is temporally relational when it consists of two other facts—each of which is about a different time—and a relation between those constituent facts. (Informally, we might say that a soft fact has two "parts," whereas a hard fact has only one.[7]) The following, then, are hard facts about the past:

(1) King John signed the Magna Carta in 1215.
(2) Barack Obama was inaugurated as the 44th President of the United States on January 20, 2009.

Contrast (1) and (2) with

(3) King John signed the Magna Carta 794 years before Barack Obama was inaugurated as President.

[6] Peter van Inwagen, "What Does an Omniscient Being Know about the Future?" in Jonathan L. Kvanvig, ed., *Oxford Studies in Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 216–30.

[7] We might also put it this way: soft facts, while *genuinely* about the past, are not *solely* about the past.

This fact (3) is temporally relational because it comprises the fact that King John signed the Magna Carta (which is about 1215), the fact that Barack Obama was inaugurated as President (which is about 2009), and the "before" relation between the first fact and the second fact.

The second clarifying assumption is that whereas all hard facts are unalterable, some—but not all—soft facts are alterable. (Or we can put the point in terms of fixity: Whereas all hard facts are fixed, soft facts may or may not be fixed.) There are at least two reasons why a soft fact might be fixed. The first reason is that both of the constituent facts might be about the past. On January 1, 2009, someone might be able to do something such that (3) would not be a fact; but on January 21, that particular soft fact is no longer alterable. The second reason why some facts are soft but nonetheless fixed is that past facts can be temporally related to future events over which nobody has any power.[8] For example, the fact that Barack Obama was inaugurated on the morning of January 20, 2009, prior to the sun's rising on January 21, is a soft fact relative to the evening of January 20—but it is also fixed, because no one at that time has any power over whether the sun rises on January 21.[9] Thus, if we want to establish that some fact is alterable, we must show that it is temporally relational (i.e. soft), and that one of the constituent facts is about a future event, and moreover that someone has power over that future event. It is therefore open to the opponent of Ockhamism to claim that theological incompatibilism is true because God's beliefs, though temporally relational, are nevertheless fixed.[10] This, however, is not the line that Widerker takes, so we will not attempt to respond to it here.[11]

[8] John Martin Fischer, in *The Metaphysics of Free Will* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1994), emphasizes the importance of temporal relationality in drawing the distinction between hard and soft facts. In Fischer's language (chapter 6), soft facts that are nevertheless fixed are "hard-core soft facts" or "hard-type soft facts." In this paper we will not consider the question of whether any of the putatively soft facts discussed below might be hard-core or hard-type soft facts.

[9] Strictly speaking, of course, this isn't true: for presumably God, on the evening of January 20, had power over whether the sun rose on January 21. But since the debate we're concerned with is the debate over whether *human* freedom is compatible with divine foreknowledge, we will restrict ourselves to the domain of human agents.

[10] Fischer (1994, chapter 6) does take roughly this line, arguing that even though facts involving God's past beliefs are soft facts, certain elements of their internal structure are hard (temporally non-relational), which means that those facts, though soft, are nonetheless fixed.

[11] Widerker discusses (and rejects) this approach in §V, 1990.

It has proven exceedingly difficult to provide a satisfying general account of the distinction between hard and soft facts.[12] Nevertheless, Ockhamists often claim that God's beliefs should turn out soft on any satisfactory analysis of the distinction.[13] Thus the Ockhamist would maintain that the following fact:

(4) God believed that Jones would mow his lawn tomorrow

is a soft fact about the past, relative to today. Although it isn't immediately obvious that (4) is temporally relational, we can recast it in a way that reveals its softness. Given the assumption that God is essentially omniscient, (4) is logically equivalent to

(5) God *correctly* believed that Jones would mow his lawn tomorrow.

And now we can say that (5) consists of the fact that God believed that Jones would mow his lawn tomorrow (which is about the past), the fact that Jones will mow his lawn tomorrow (which is about the future), and the relation of correspondence between those two facts. Thus, (5) is soft and—on the further assumption that soft facthood is closed under logical equivalence—so is (4).[14]

Ockhamists also claim that in addition to the temporal relation between God's past beliefs about our future free actions and the actions themselves, there is also a relation of *counterfactual dependence*. We sometimes have the ability to do otherwise and, if we were to do otherwise, God would not have held a belief that he actually held. Ockhamists acknowledge that an ability to falsify a hard fact would amount to an ability to change the past; but they also maintain that falsifying a soft fact does not require such

[12] Valiant attempts have been made, however, starting with Marilyn McCord Adams, "Is the Existence of God a 'Hard' Fact?" reprinted in Fischer, ed., 1989, 74–85; and continuing with (among others) Joshua Hoffman and Gary Rosenkrantz, "Hard and Soft Facts," reprinted in Fischer, ed., 1989, 123–35; and Alfred J. Freddoso, "Accidental Necessity and Logical Determinism," reprinted in Fischer, ed., 1989, 136–58.

[13] This is roughly the position that Alvin Plantinga takes in his "On Ockham's Way Out," reprinted in Fischer, ed., 1989, 178–215.

[14] Thanks to Carl Ginet for suggesting (in personal correspondence) this construal of facts such as (4). Ginet also proposes that the facts constituting a soft fact must themselves be *hard* facts—but we don't see any reason to rule out the possibility that a soft fact has another soft fact as a constituent. For example, the following seems to be a soft fact: "God believed that King John would sign the Magna Carta 794 years before Barack Obama was inaugurated as President." The first constituent fact is about two times (which might complicate the analysis), but it remains true that the two constituent facts are about different times.

extravagant power. If it is in one's power to falsify one of the parts of a soft fact, then it is in one's power to falsify the soft fact itself.

The most obvious point of attack for opponents of Ockhamism is the claim that facts about God's beliefs are alterable soft facts about the past. Widerker does indeed attack this claim, arguing that it is not enough merely to point out superficial similarities between a temporally relational fact about God's past beliefs, such as (4), and temporally relational facts such as (3). The Ockhamist must also identify a property that these two facts share, and moreover "he must give us a good reason to think that it is *in virtue* of having this property or feature" that a fact like (4) is alterable.[15] Widerker considers several attempts to satisfy this requirement, but finds them wanting. He recognizes, however, that there is at least one way for the Ockhamist to fend off his attack (albeit a way he considers implausible), and so, in order to fortify his position, he also develops a more general objection to Ockhamism—the argument from future-contingent causal chains.[16]

3. Widerker's Argument from Future-contingent Causal Chains

Widerker begins by considering a scenario in which God's past knowledge (and hence, we will assume, his past belief) regarding some future free action is, given the circumstances, a causally necessary condition for the occurrence of some other event—an event that occurs after God's past belief, but prior to the future action. For example, God's past belief that Jones would mow his lawn tomorrow might prompt God to warn Smith prior to Jones's mowing his lawn. (Imagine that Smith's new puppy—an incredibly sound sleeper—is having a snooze in the tall grasses of Jones's backyard.) In this scenario, God's past belief that Jones would mow his

[15] Widerker, 1990, p. 465 (emphasis in original).

[16] Widerker, 1990, p. 474. We should note that the Ockhamist response (which Widerker thinks is available but implausible) suggests the eternity (or atemporal) solution to the problem of divine foreknowledge and human freedom. He criticizes the eternity solution in his "A Problem for the Eternity Solution," *International Journal for the Philosophy of Religion*, 29, 2 (Apr. 1991): 87–95. His argument against the eternity solution is structurally the same as his argument against the Ockhamist solution, and we think our criticisms apply to his argument against the eternity solution with equal force. But we will not develop that point in any detail here.

lawn is a causally necessary condition for his warning Smith prior to Jones's mowing. Thus, on the Ockhamist supposition that Jones is able to refrain from mowing his lawn, it would appear that Jones is able to prevent the occurrence of a causally necessary condition for God's warning Smith (i.e. God's belief that Jones would mow his lawn). And since it is plausible to think that if Jones has such control over a causally necessary condition of some event then he also has control over the event itself, we can conclude from Jones's ability to do otherwise (and hence his ability to affect God's belief in some way) that he is also able to prevent the occurrence of

(W1) God warned Smith that Jones would mow his lawn tomorrow (and thus that his puppy was in grave danger) prior to Jones's mowing his lawn tomorrow.

Moreover, since (W1) will serve as a causally necessary condition for various subsequent facts, it would appear that Jones is also able to prevent the occurrence of facts such as

(W2) Smith heard a voice telling him that (Jones would mow his lawn tomorrow and thus that) his puppy was in grave danger

and

(W3) Smith came to believe that his puppy was in grave danger.

In short, Widerker argues that if Jones is able to do otherwise, then he is able to falsify past facts like (W1)–(W3).[17] But (W1)–(W3) are hard facts about the past, and nobody can alter hard facts. So Jones must not be able to refrain from mowing his lawn after all. Therefore we cannot have power over God's past beliefs, since such power would imply that we could, in some circumstances, have the power to falsify some hard facts about the past. The Ockhamist appears to be on the ropes.

Despite the apparent force of this argument, we contend that the Ockhamist need not be overly concerned. In particular, we contend that Widerker faces a dilemma—which arises because the past facts (W1)–(W3) are not the uncontroversially hard facts that they need to be in order

[17] This point presumably holds for (W4)–(Wn) as well, where (W4)–(Wn) are additional (apparently hard) facts about some time between God's believing and Jones's mowing: If Jones has the ability to do otherwise, then he also has the ability to render (W4)–(Wn) false.

for his anti-Ockhamist argument to do its work. Before we elaborate on that claim, however, we need to say a little more about hard and soft facts.

Recall that if a fact about the past is soft, then it is *temporally relational*. So, for example, the fact that it was true in 1900 that we would begin writing a paper on Ockhamism in 2010, if a fact,[18] is temporally relational—it is a soft fact about the past (relative to January 1st, 2010). Had we failed to begin writing this paper in 2010, then that soft fact about 1900 would not have been a fact. And because we had the ability to falsify the temporal relatum, "we begin writing a paper on Ockhamism in 2010," we had the ability to falsify the soft fact itself. On the other hand, the fact that the competition for the Davis Cup was established in 1900 is temporally non-relational (i.e. hard) and hence fixed. Nobody in 2010 can render that fact false.

We will now recast the dispute between the incompatibilist and the Ockhamist in a way that will clarify the dilemma that we present below. First consider some putatively free action X. If some agent S is able at some time t_2 to do X at a later time t_3, then the following ability claim (or "can-claim") will be true:

(A) S, at t_2, can do X at t_3.

Suppose that (A) is true. Now take some fact F about the past. The relevant question—the one to which incompatibilists and Ockhamists will provide conflicting answers—is whether the truth of (A) is consistent with the truth of a backtracking counterfactual involving both X and F. The backtracking counterfactual (or just "backtracker") will look like this:

(B) If S had done X at t_3, then F, which obtained at t_1, could not have obtained at t_1.

Both parties to this dispute will agree that when F is a hard fact about t_1, the relevant can-claim and the paired backtracker cannot both be true; in particular, they will agree that if the backtracker (B) is true (when F is a

[18] We say "if a fact" because some have expressed doubts about there being such a thing as truth at a time. Pike (1965, p. 36), for example, says: "I share the misgivings of those contemporary philosophers who have wondered what (if any) sense can be attached to a statement of the form 'It was true at T1 that E would occur at T2.'" Peter van Inwagen also discusses (and expresses skepticism about) the notion of truth at a time in his *An Essay on Free Will* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), pp. 34–43. We will not consider such worries here, although a complete defense of Ockhamism would clearly require addressing them.

hard fact), then the can-claim (A) must be false.[19] What they will not agree on is what happens when we substitute one of God's past beliefs for *F*. The theological incompatibilist will claim that substituting one of God's past beliefs for *F* changes nothing: *F* is still a hard fact, and (A) and (B) are still inconsistent. The Ockhamist, however, claims that when the fact *F* in the relevant counterfactual is (a fact about) one of God's past beliefs, then that fact is both soft (temporally relational) and counterfactually dependent (on the event to which it is temporally related). Moreover, the Ockhamist maintains that there is no inconsistency in claiming that both (A) and (B) are true. If this is right, then certain of God's beliefs are such that *S* can act in a certain way, and if *S* acts in that way, it would then be the case that God would not have held a belief that he actually held.

Once we construe the dialectic in this way, we can see that what the incompatibilist needs to show is that (A) and (B) are indeed incompatible (where the *X* stands for some putatively free action that is allegedly foreknown by God). One way to do this, of course, is to argue directly that (facts about) God's past beliefs, Ockhamist claims notwithstanding, are hard facts after all. The other way to do this is to argue *indirectly*—by substituting for *F* a less controversial hard fact, and so sidestepping the question of whether God's beliefs are soft facts (and whether, even if they are, that allows the Ockhamist to affirm the compatibility of (A) and (B)). Widerker's argument can plausibly be construed as an implementation of this indirect strategy because he substitutes for *F* facts about the past, such as (W1), that do not explicitly involve any of God's beliefs. (For the sake of concision, in what follows we will refer to the indirect anti-Ockhamist strategy implemented by Widerker [and, as we will see below, van Inwagen] as the "indirect strategy," or the "indirect argument.")

[19] We are construing the Ockhamist as acknowledging that nobody can so act that a hard fact would not have been a fact, but maintaining that there are some soft facts such that someone can so act that a soft fact would not have been a fact. In other words, we are following Widerker (who is himself following Fischer) in construing the set of past facts that are alterable as a subset of the past facts that are soft facts. Someone could question this framework, however, and argue that the Ockhamist should *not* agree that nobody can so act that a hard fact would not have been a fact. On this view, the question of whether someone can so act that a certain fact would not have been a fact is unrelated (or at least orthogonal) to the question of whether that fact is hard or soft. Nonetheless, since it is at the very least an open question as to which framework better captures the Ockhamist commitment, we will continue to construe the Ockhamist as denying that hard facts are alterable. (Thanks to Patrick Todd for emphasizing this point to us in personal conversation.)

In order for such a strategy to represent dialectical progress, the relevant fact *F* about the past must be a clear case of a hard fact. For only when *F* is indisputably a hard fact is it clear that if the backtracker (B) is true, then the can-claim (A) must be false. Otherwise, it is open to the Ockhamist to maintain that the *F* in question is alterable—that *F* is relevantly similar to a fact about God's beliefs insofar as it exhibits both temporal relationality and counterfactual dependence.

4. A Dilemma for Widerker

In the previous section we identified two desiderata that must be satisfied by proponents of the indirect strategy if they are to succeed in refuting the Ockhamist. First, they must avoid scenarios in which the fact that is supposed to call into question some future free action is a fact about God's past beliefs. (Embracing such scenarios is not necessarily a hopeless strategy; it is just a different, more direct strategy.) Second, they must provide a clear case of a hard (i.e. temporally non-relational) fact that calls into question the freedom of some future action. If this can be done, then the relevant backtracking counterfactual will have a hard fact in the consequent, implying that it can be plausibly considered inconsistent with its corresponding can-claim. Widerker's argument against the Ockhamist avoids explicitly appealing to facts about God's past beliefs to challenge our freedom to do otherwise. However, as we will now argue, the past facts he *does* appeal to do not threaten our freedom either. As a result, his argument should not unsettle the committed Ockhamist.

Consider an abridged version of (W1):

(W1) God warned Smith that his puppy was in grave danger prior to Jones's mowing his lawn tomorrow.

Since the most salient feature of the indirect strategy is that it avoids engaging the debate over whether or not facts about God's past states or activities (in particular, his past beliefs) are soft, it seems inappropriate to claim that a different sort of divine activity—warning Smith, as in (W1)—can be part of an uncontroversially hard fact about the past. In support of this point, compare (W1) with (4):

(4) God believed that Jones would mow his lawn tomorrow.

One plausible reason why God's past beliefs are taken to be soft is that those beliefs *entail*, and are thus necessarily connected to, the occurrence of the future event that they are about. The problems that beset a fully general entailment criterion (according to which a fact is soft if and only if it entails some fact about the future) are well documented.[20] But it remains an open question whether some *restricted* entailment criterion—such as the one proposed by Plantinga[21]—will turn out to be viable. Thus, for now at least, the Ockhamist can follow Plantinga in claiming that nothing that entails that Jones will mow his lawn tomorrow can be a hard fact about the past.[22] And since (W1) also entails that Jones will mow his lawn tomorrow,[23] the Ockhamist can plausibly say that the warning in (W1) is no less a soft fact than the divine belief in (4) that prompts the warning. More generally, it seems plausible to claim that any past fact about t_2 that entails that Jones mows his lawn at some future time t_3 is at least a candidate for soft facthood about t_2.

Above we construed the Ockhamist as arguing that Jones can refrain from mowing his lawn at t_3, and maintaining that this can-claim is consistent with the claim that if Jones were to refrain from mowing his lawn at t_3, then God would not have believed that Jones would mow his lawn at t_3 (i.e. consistent with the claim that God's past belief is counterfactually dependent on Jones's mowing his lawn). Given the crucial similarity between (4) and (W1), the Ockhamist can arguably maintain that if Jones were to refrain from mowing his lawn at t_3 then God's warning to Smith would not have been issued. Thus, concludes the Ockhamist, the warning in (W1) does not endanger Jones's freedom.

[20] See, for example, John Martin Fischer, "Freedom and Foreknowledge," *The Philosophical Review*, XCII, No. 1 (January 1983), 67–79.

[21] Plantinga (1986).

[22] We too are following Plantinga (1986, pp. 248ff.), at least insofar as we are endorsing a restricted entailment criterion that begins with a certain sort of immediate or basic fact, such as "Jones mows his lawn." The restricted entailment criterion says that any past fact that entails that the basic fact in question obtains at some future time is a soft fact about the past. So we join Plantinga (along with pretty much everyone else) in rejecting a fully general entailment criterion.

[23] Here one might object that (W1), unlike (4), does not entail that Jones mows his lawn because, although God's beliefs are necessarily true, it is possible that some of his warnings are conditional. But we have formulated (W1) in a way that forestalls this objection. Even if some of God's warnings are conditional, a warning that Jones will mow his lawn that is issued *prior to his mowing* cannot be a conditional warning.

Perhaps the real mistake here is the supposition that the truth of (W1) guarantees the occurrence of the future event. If the incompatibilist rejects this supposition, then there is no entailment relation between the warning and the occurrence of the future action, and hence no temptation to think that the warning's occurrence is a soft fact. It should be clear, however, that this response will not generate any reason to think that the ability claim (A) is inconsistent with the backtracking counterfactual (B). To allow that the future action predicted by the warning may not occur is to give up on the claim that the act is not free. For if there is no guarantee of the act's occurrence, e.g. of Jones mowing his lawn at t_3, then it is open to him to refrain from mowing—thus rendering the warning false for example. And if Jones can render the warning false then there is no problematic counterfactual dependence between his action and a hard fact about the past. There is no need, that is, for him to be able to act such that the warning would not have been issued.

In other words, we are suggesting a dilemma for Widerker. For an incompatibilist argument based on his strategy to do the necessary dialectical work in the debate against the Ockhamist, the relevant backtracking counterfactual, e.g.

(B1) If Jones had refrained from mowing his lawn at t_3, then (W1), which is a fact about t_2, could not have been a fact about t_2

must be true. Moreover, the fact (W1) in the consequent of the backtracker (B1) needs to be a hard fact, so that the truth of (B1) clearly rules out the truth of the relevant can-claim:

(A1) Jones can refrain from mowing his lawn at t_3.

The dilemma is that the truth of (W1) either entails that Jones mows his lawn at t_3, or it does not—and in neither case does its truth call into question the relevant can-claim. If the truth of (W1) does entail that Jones mows his lawn, then the backtracker is obviously true. But in this case it is not at all obvious that (W1) is indeed a hard fact. Thus the Ockhamist can plausibly maintain that (W1) is a soft fact, in which case there is little reason for him to doubt the truth of the relevant can-claim (because, recall, Ockhamists are happy to affirm the conjunction of a can-claim and its corresponding backtracker when the fact in the consequent of the backtracker is a soft fact). If, on the other hand, the truth of (W1) does not entail that Jones mows his lawn, then (W1) seems to be an obvious case

of a hard fact. But in this case it is not at all obvious that the backtracker (B1) is true—for there is little reason to think that (W1) could not have been a fact if Jones had refrained from mowing his lawn. (For example, as mentioned above, the warning could have been mistaken, which case (W1) would still have been a fact.) And of course if the backtracker is false, then there is no reason *stemming from the backtracker* to conclude that the can-claim is false. Thus, whether or not the truth of (W1) entails Jones's mowing of his lawn (at the relevant time), the Ockhamist should feel no pressure to doubt the truth of the claim that Jones can refrain from mowing at that time.

What about (W2)?

(W2) Smith heard a voice telling him that his puppy is in grave danger.

(W2) is farther removed from divine activity, and so not evidently susceptible to the Ockhamist move. Nevertheless, the same response is available. If the truth of (W2) entails the occurrence of the action that it predicts, then it is temporally relational; on this assumption, the voice in question is assumed to be God's voice. Hence, it is dialectically open to the Ockhamist to insist that it also exhibits counterfactual dependence—which is to say that the relevant backtracker

(B2) If Jones had refrained from mowing his lawn, then (W2), which is a fact about t_2, could not have been a fact about t_2

is consistent with the claim (A1) that Jones can refrain from mowing his lawn. On the other hand, if Smith's hearing a voice does not entail that Jones will mow his lawn (because here it is not assumed that the voice in question is God's voice), then there is little reason to believe that his refraining from mowing will require that the voice would have said something different (or nothing at all). In this case, the voice that Smith heard could have simply been wrong. Thus, if the truth of (W2) does not entail Jones's mowing, then (B2) seems to be false and as a result does not threaten the truth of (A1). As with (W1), it seems that without the guarantee produced by entailment, there is little reason to believe that the relevant can-claim is false.

Not surprisingly, we think that

(W3) Smith came to believe that his puppy was in grave danger

can be dealt with in a similar fashion.[24] We think that the Ockhamist could say the following: Given that we are talking only about a belief of Smith's, it seems quite clear that this fact is temporally non-relational, and thus fixed. Unfortunately for the incompatibilist, however, there is very little pressure toward thinking that Jones's doing otherwise will *require* altering the fact that Smith came to believe a certain thing. And if there is little reason to think that this backtracker is true, then there is little reason to think that the can-claim is false. The incompatibilist could of course remind us here that God's past belief is a causally necessary condition for this particular belief of Smith's—but this amounts to abandoning the indirect strategy, which is supposed to be neutral on the question of whether God's past beliefs are soft facts. (Recall that this strategy, as we see it, grants that God's past beliefs might be such that they can be changed by, e.g. Jones's actions, and tries to generate a problem by showing how that ability would entail an ability to falsify some obviously hard fact about the past.)

Widerker's argument uses a past fact *F* for which God's past belief is a causally necessary condition. Our general contention is that any indirect argument that uses a fact having this feature is going to fall prey to our dilemma. For the more directly *F* represents some activity of God, the more it is going to seem soft (at least by Ockhamist lights). And if it is soft, then there is at least a case to be made that the relevant backtracker is consistent with the relevant can-claim. Conversely, as *F* becomes more remote from divine activity, it will seem more plausible to claim that *S* need not falsify that fact in order to do otherwise—i.e. it will seem more plausible to claim that the relevant backtracker is false. And a false backtracker cannot be used to challenge the truth of any can-claims. In support of our general contention, we will now examine van Inwagen's implementation of the indirect anti-Ockhamist strategy.

5. van Inwagen's Argument

van Inwagen begins with a variation of the standard argument for theological incompatibilism that he takes to be irrefutable. Assuming that God is temporal, he points out that if God believed in the past that he (van Inwagen) would tell a lie in the future (at a specified time), then in order

[24] And we would argue that the same holds for (W4)–(Wn).

for him to tell the truth at that time, either God's past belief would have to be false, or it would have to be the case that God did not have the past belief that he in fact had. But, claims van Inwagen, both of those are impossible; so he is not free to tell the truth if God believed in the past that he would tell a lie, and more generally, we are never free to do otherwise if God has exhaustive foreknowledge of future contingents.[25]

van Inwagen recognizes that this argument does not apply to a God who is atemporal, or outside of time—but he reformulates his argument in a way that is intended to apply with equal (or close to equal) force to the atemporalist about God.

The key aspect of the reformulated argument is a move from God's past belief about what one will do to the past existence of some temporal effect of God's timeless activity. (This makes van Inwagen's argument importantly similar to Widerker's, as we will explain in further detail below.) As the modified story goes, God causes, *ex nihilo*, a monument to come into existence in 1900. On this monument is etched a statement to the effect that van Inwagen will tell a lie at some specified point in the future (11:46am EST, 23 December 2006, as it so happens). Thus van Inwagen:

> Suppose God has done this thing he is able to have done. Can it be that my lying... was a free act? That is, was I able, on that occasion, to tell the truth? Well, was there, just before that moment, a possible continuation of the (then) present state of affairs in which I told the truth? Let us consider all the possible continuations of that state of affairs. It is true in every one of them that [an inscribed] monument... came into existence *ex nihilo* in 1900—and true that its coming to be was caused by God's extra-temporal act of creation. Is it true in any of the possible continuations of the then-present state of affairs that the words inscribed on the monument did not express a true proposition? No, for in that case God would either have been mistaken or have been a deceiver, and both are impossible.[26]

van Inwagen concludes that his telling a lie is not a free act, since there is no possible continuation of the present of the sort that would be required for his telling a lie to be a free act—i.e. no possible continuation of the present in which (1) the inscribed monument does not exist or (2) the inscription expresses a false proposition.

[25] van Inwagen, 2008, pp. 217–18. [26] van Inwagen, 2008, p. 219.

This inscribed monument falls under the category of what van Inwagen calls "Freedom-Denying Prophetic Objects"—a category which includes any object that infallibly expresses a true proposition about some future act of some putatively free creature. This notion of a Freedom-Denying Prophetic Object (FDPO) is intuitive and intriguing, albeit rather underspecified. The only general specification that van Inwagen gives us is that the concept of an FDPO is "a very abstract one."[27] Nevertheless, he does give some examples of other prophetic objects that could be freedom-denying—for example, an actual human prophet who foretells some human action with the help of divine inspiration would count as an FDPO. In any case, facts about the past existence of a monument appear to be hard facts, and if doing otherwise requires altering such facts, then the Ockhamist is back on the ropes.

Before we address van Inwagen's argument, notice the parallel with Widerker's argument. In particular, notice that van Inwagen makes no attempt to address the question of whether or not God's past beliefs about the future actions of free creatures are hard or soft facts about the past. Instead, he appeals to a fact the hardness of which (presumably) no one would challenge. Moreover, crucial to both arguments is the supposition that God, were he to have exhaustive foreknowledge, would bring about some state of affairs—facts about which would clearly be hard facts about the past (at any time after God brings about the state of affairs in question). For Widerker, the relevant state of affairs initiates a future-contingent causal chain, the links of which appear to constitute hard facts about the past. For van Inwagen, the relevant state of affairs is the existence of some object that infallibly foretells some future event. And whether we are talking about Smith hearing a voice in the past or the past existence of an inscribed monument, both facts seem plausibly to be hard facts about the past, and thus provide the grounds for establishing the incompatibility of divine foreknowledge and human freedom. Thus, although van Inwagen has a different target in mind (the atemporalist, rather than the Ockhamist), his approach can plausibly be classified as a development of the anti-Ockhamist strategy introduced by Widerker.[28]

[27] van Inwagen, 2008, p. 219.

[28] Another reason for considering these arguments together is that, as we pointed out above (note 16), although Widerker first developed this strategy against Ockhamism, he later (1991) employed it against the eternity (atemporalist) solution. So we are, as it were, completing the circle by bringing the argument back around to apply to the Ockhamist once

We have seen that when Widerker's facts (W1)–(W3) are examined more closely, they do not give the Ockhamist sufficient reason to surrender his view. We will now argue that the same can be said for certain facts about (allegedly) freedom-denying prophetic objects.

6. A Dilemma for van Inwagen

The indirect strategy, recall, requires a fact *F* that does not involve any of God's beliefs and is clearly and uncontroversially a hard fact about the past—thus making it evident that the relevant claims,

(A) *S*, at t_2, can do *X* at t_3
(B) If *S* had done *X* at t_3, *F* could not have been a fact about t_1,

are inconsistent. If van Inwagen's argument does not meet these requirements, then it will not convince the Ockhamist, who can respond in a way that resembles the response developed in §4. He can maintain that God's beliefs are soft facts, and that counterfactuals such as (B), which contain a fact about one of God's beliefs in the consequent, are consistent with corresponding can-claims. Thus, unless van Inwagen can give the Ockhamist a reason why a soft fact about an FDPO is different from a soft fact about one of God's beliefs, the Ockhamist seems within his rights in claiming two things: first, that counterfactuals such as (B), which contain a fact about an FDPO in the consequent, are also consistent with corresponding can-claims; and second, that if the fact about the FDPO is indeed a hard fact, then the appropriate backtracker will be false.

In van Inwagen's argument, the relevant claims are as follows:

(C) van Inwagen, in 2005, can tell the truth at the specified time in 2006.
(D) If van Inwagen had told the truth at a certain time in 2006, then the (fact of the) existence of an inscribed monument testifying to his telling a lie at a certain time in 2006 could not have been a fact about 1900.

again. But, as also noted above, even though we are confident that our defense of Ockhamism could be adjusted so as to constitute a defense of the eternity solution, we will not make those adjustments here.

The relevant fact *F* is the existence of a particular FDPO: an inscribed monument testifying to van Inwagen's telling a lie at a certain time in 2006. The question (for the proponent of the indirect anti-Ockhamist strategy) is whether the truth of (D) rules out the truth of (C). And only if *F* is clearly a hard fact can the claim that the truth of (D) rules out the truth of (C) get any traction. As it turns out, however, *F* is not obviously a hard fact about the past. At first blush, it may *seem* to be a hard fact; after all, what could be harder than the past existence of an inscribed monument? But the truth (perhaps obscured by the lack of detail in van Inwagen's characterization of FDPOs) is that we have good reason—says the Ockhamist—to believe that facts about the existence of FDPOs are actually soft.

The proposed line of attack here runs parallel to the line of attack against Widerker. It seems natural to think that the presence of the FDPO in question (i.e. the inscribed monument) entails that the future act (the lie to which the monument testifies) will occur. This seems true because, after all, it was God who caused the monument to come into existence. As van Inwagen points out, God cannot be mistaken, and he cannot be a deceiver; so it must be true that the existence of the monument entails the future telling of the lie. But, again, this is precisely the feature of a past fact that is supposed to make it a soft fact. It seems plausible to claim, relative to 2005 at least, that any fact about 1900 that entails that Peter van Inwagen will tell a lie at 11:46am EST on 23 December 2006 is a soft fact about 1900. Given the softness of this fact, the Ockhamist can maintain that van Inwagen can tell the truth on 23 December 2006, and further that the can-claim (C) is consistent with the truth of (D)—consistent with the claim that if he does tell the truth on 23 December 2006, then the inscribed monument would not have existed in 1900 (or would not have been inscribed to foretell a lie occurring in 2006). Thus, continues the Ockhamist, the possible presence of the inscribed monument (or any other alleged FDPO) does not endanger van Inwagen's (or anyone else's) freedom.

Moreover, giving up on the entailment relation helps van Inwagen no more than it helps Widerker. To suggest that the presence of the FDPO does not entail the occurrence of the future action it predicts is to allow that the future action may not occur, and hence to give up on the claim that the FDPO presents a threat to the relevant agent's freedom. For if there is no guarantee of the act's occurrence (e.g. of van Inwagen's lying in December 2006), then it is open to him to refrain from lying—thus rendering, e.g. the inscription on the monument false. In other words, giving

up on the entailment means that the backtracker (D) is false, and hence that it cannot call into question the truth of the can-claim (C). Or, to put the point in a different way, if the inscription on the monument is a hard fact about 1900, then van Inwagen should view it as no more threatening to his ability to tell the truth than the following sort of case: It is November of 2006. Wishing to expose van Inwagen in a lie, his friend hires a cloud writer to write across the sky, "van Inwagen will tell a lie at 11:46 EST on 23 December 2006." Seeing the cloud-writing wouldn't give van Inwagen any reason to doubt his ability to tell the truth at that time, and—given the lack of entailment—neither should the inscription on the monument.

In short, the dilemma faced by van Inwagen is that the existence of the monument either entails that he tells a lie in 2006, or it does not—and in neither case should its existence preclude the truth of the relevant can-claim (C). If the monument's existence does entail that van Inwagen tells a lie, then the fact of its existence appears, at least by Ockhamist lights, to be a soft fact. And if it is a soft fact, then there is little reason for the Ockhamist to doubt the truth of (C). If, on the other hand, the existence of the monument does not entail that van Inwagen tells a lie, then the backtracker (D) is false, and hence there is no reason for the Ockhamist to doubt the truth of (C). Thus, whether or not this putative FDPO entails the occurrence of van Inwagen's lie at the relevant time, there is little pressure on the Ockhamist to doubt the truth of the claim that van Inwagen can refrain from telling the lie at that time. We conclude that van Inwagen's argument, like Widerker's, fails as an implementation of the indirect anti-Ockhamist strategy.

7. Widerker's Rejection of Entailment Criteria

Since the notion of entailment plays a significant role in our critique of the indirect strategy, we should acknowledge and briefly discuss Widerker's rejection of various entailment criteria for soft facthood. Widerker considers and dismisses three attempts to analyze the concept of a soft fact in terms of entailment: William Rowe's, Marilyn Adams's, and Alvin Plantinga's.[29] In each case, the basis of his dismissal is the following claim.

[29] Widerker, 1990, pp. 465–70.

He says that entailment is not a reliable indicator of soft facthood, since there are clear examples of past facts that are hard (i.e. past facts that are now "over-and-done-with") but nonetheless entail certain things about the future. So, for example, Widerker construes Adams as claiming that a hard fact about a time *t* "must not entail the obtaining of a state of affairs at a time later than *t*."[30] But Widerker asks us to consider the fact of God promising Smith at t_1 that Jack will sign a contract at t_3:

(6) God promised Smith at t_1 that Jack would sign the contract at t_3.

This fact entails something about t_3, namely that Jack will sign a contract at t_3.[31] But, continues Widerker, "It seems intuitive to assume that the fact that God promised Smith at t_1 that Jack will sign the contract is fully accomplished and over-and-done-with [i.e. hard] at t_2."[32] So it appears incorrect to say that a hard fact must not entail anything about the future.

We hope that it is clear by now that this argument, based on the divine promise example, is insufficient (at least by itself) to show that entailment cannot be part of an account of soft facthood. The same reasons that support the softness of a fact about God's past beliefs will also support the softness of a fact about God's past promises (or warnings). In fact, this point holds in the other direction as well: the claim that a fact about one of God's past beliefs is *hard* is no less intuitive than the claim that a fact about one of God's past promises is hard. We agree that it is intuitive to claim that past facts about God's promises are hard facts. But it is also intuitive to claim that past facts about God's beliefs are hard facts. (This intuitiveness

[30] Widerker, 1990, p. 466.

[31] We should note that (6) only entails that Jack will sign a contract at t_3 on the traditional theistic assumption that God is essentially immutable. For if God is not essentially immutable, then he could promise one thing at t_1 and later change his mind and promise something else at t_2. (For an illuminating discussion of some of the issues surrounding the question of whether God's promising that *p* entails that *p,* see Jonathan Kvanvig, "Open Theism and the Future," in *Destiny and Deliberation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 65–83.) But notice also that rejecting this assumption is of no help to Widerker, because the restricted entailment criterion that we have been relying upon merely says that entailment of a particular sort of fact is sufficient for soft facthood; nothing follows from a failure of entailment. Thus we can also construe the point of this section as a dilemma: God's promise that *p* either entails that *p* or it doesn't entail that *p.* If it entails that *p,* then it is on a par (as regards its hardness or softness) with God's belief that *p.* If it doesn't entail that *p,* then the restricted entailment criterion doesn't apply. Either way, divine promises do not provide any reason to reject the criterion.

[32] Widerker, 1990, pp. 467–8.

is, we take it, precisely the reason that contemporary formulations of the standard argument for theological incompatibilism typically rely on a fact about God's past beliefs rather than a fact about his past knowledge.) The Ockhamist innovation was that God's beliefs might not be hard after all. If this (putative) insight applies to God's beliefs, but not God's promises (warnings, etc.), then we need a reason why.

Widerker does attempt to provide a reason why facts about God's promises are different from facts about God's beliefs. He points out that a divine promise "can be remembered by Smith, can be empirically detected by him…and may have traces…just like regular hard facts about the past."[33] But this reason is inconclusive at best. To see why, first note that whatever the similarities between facts about God's promises and regular (i.e. obvious and uncontroversial) hard facts about the past, there remains a crucial difference. Facts about God's promises—like facts about God's beliefs—are always going to have two parts. And the part that pertains to the future (i.e. the part that pertains to the act or state of affairs promised by God) will make its enclosing fact a soft fact. In other words, the future-directed part of facts about God's promises appears to provide a "handle" by which those facts can be altered.[34]

Consider again Plantinga's view on facts about God's beliefs. On his view, the reason why

(4) God believed that Jones would mow his lawn tomorrow

is a soft fact (relative to today) is that (4) is logically equivalent to

(7) God believed that Jones would mow his lawn tomorrow and Jones will mow his lawn tomorrow,

which is soft because no conjunctive fact that contains "Jones will mow his lawn" as a conjunct can be hard. And since hardness is closed under logical equivalence, (4) cannot be hard either.[35]

Now return to Widerker's divine promise example. Notice that the relevant fact, (6), is logically equivalent to the following conjunctive proposition:

(8) God promised Smith at t_1 that Jack would sign the contract at t_3 and Jack will sign the contract at t_3.

[33] Widerker, 1990, p. 469.
[34] Thanks to John Fischer for this helpful metaphor.
[35] Plantinga, 1986, p. 248.

On Plantinga's view, (8) is soft because no conjunctive past fact (relative to t_3) that contains "Jack will sign the contract at t_3" as a conjunct can be a hard fact. And (6) will turn out soft as well, because it is logically equivalent to (8). So Plantinga appears to be committed to the softness of (6).

Widerker takes this to show that Plantinga is wrong, because (6) "surely expresses a hard fact about the past."[36] How can we be so sure that (6) expresses a hard fact about the past? Perhaps it is because God's promises are going to leave empirical traces that can be detected (facts about which would, were it not for God's involvement, obviously be hard). But note that the empirical traces issue only from a *part* of a fact such as (6). That part of such a fact leaves empirical traces does not imply that the fact as a whole is hard, especially given that it has *another* part that is intuitively about the future.[37]

For those who remain uncomfortable with our use of the restricted entailment criterion, notice that we could run our argument with a different analysis of the distinction between hard and soft facts. On all of the analyses that we have encountered, facts such as (W1) and (6)—which involve a divine warning and a divine promise, respectively—will come out soft. But pointing out that (W1) and (6) intuitively seem hard is not enough to defeat these analyses—at least not if it is granted that facts about God's beliefs might be soft. For facts about God's beliefs intuitively seem hard at first, but upon analysis turn out to be at least arguably soft. Why should God's warnings or promises be any different?

8. Conclusion

We will close by summarizing the dialectic and our contribution to it. First, the Ockhamist claims that facts about God's past beliefs are soft. One reason, although certainly not the only reason, to suppose that such facts are soft is that they satisfy Plantinga's "restricted entailment" criterion for soft facthood. And, given that they satisfy this restricted entailment criterion, their being facts about the past depends on something basic happening at a future time. That is, they are temporally relational. Perhaps

[36] Widerker (1990).

[37] This point might lead someone to reject the claim that some of God's past beliefs can be soft facts about the past. That result is acceptable to us, as our point here is merely that beliefs and promises (decrees, warnings, etc.) stand or fall together as regards their softness.

the fact about God's belief in the past "includes" the subsequent fact, or perhaps it depends on it in some weaker way—but in either case, says the Ockhamist, the past fact about God's belief cannot uncontroversially be considered "over and done with" in the past.[38]

But this question—of whether God's beliefs are temporally relational—is too contentious for some of the opponents of Ockhamism. These opponents, Widerker and van Inwagen among them, would rather sidestep this question. So, for example, Widerker and van Inwagen claim (or at least would claim) that their proposed freedom-denying prophetic objects (or events), being physical objects or events, with empirical traces, succeed in avoiding the controversy. But the dilemma we present above shows that they cannot in this way sidestep the controversy. More specifically, we have argued that when the facts in question are construed so as to involve God, their obtaining (i.e. the existence of the object, or the occurrence of the warning) entails that something basic occurs later. Thus, although it might at first appear that the existence or occurrence of the object or event is temporally non-relational, arguably it is not. And finally, if the facts in question are construed so as not to involve God, then there is none of the counterfactual dependence (between belief and action) that is supposed to force the Ockhamist to concede the falsity of the relevant can-claim.

Notice that we are not arguing for the acceptance of Ockhamism. Because the view allows that agents might have counterfactual power over God's past beliefs, it remains controversial; and there may yet be a way for the anti-Ockhamist to show that God's beliefs are not soft facts (or at least not the right kind of soft fact). Our main point is simply that the only way for the *indirect* anti-Ockhamist strategy to get any traction is if the fact under consideration (the fact about a putatively freedom-denying prophetic object or event) is truly and uncontroversially a hard fact about the past. Furthermore, and crucially, the fact has to be such that refraining from the putatively free action will require altering that uncontroversially hard fact. But, at least in the specific cases we have examined above, the posited fact is not what it needs to be. If it entails the occurrence of the action in question, then it is arguably not a hard fact after all. On the other hand, if it does not entail anything about the action, then the relevant backtracker will be false and so nothing about the posited fact rules

[38] Thanks to John Fischer for helping us summarize this stage of the dialectic clearly and concisely.

out the possibility of some agent freely rendering *it* false as well. In neither case should the Ockhamist conclude that our freedom to do otherwise is in danger.[39]

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