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FOREKNOWLEDGE AND FREEDOM: A REPLY TO GALE

John Martin Fischer

Richard Gale contends that my arguments against the "Ockhamist" reply to the argument for the incompatibility of God's foreknowledge and human freedom depend on problematic inferences involving the notion of "bringing about" a proposition. I point out that my arguments do not rest on such inferences, and I seek to clarify what I take to be the basic thrust of the argument for incompatibilism. This argument does not rest on the impossibility of backward causation, but the implausibility of supposing that we can have it in our power so to act that the past would have been different from what it actually was.

In his probing and suggestive piece, "Divine Omniscience, Human Freedom, and Backward Causation," Richard Gale raises many intriguing issues; in the brief space allotted to me here, I can only address a few points (and in a somewhat schematic way). Gale lays out a version of an important argument for the incompatibility of God's foreknowledge and human freedom (in the sense that involves alternative possibilities). He then contends that my arguments against the "Ockhamist" reply to this basic argument are unconvincing insofar as they rely on certain allegedly problematic inferences involving the notion of "bringing about" a proposition.

On Gale's interpretation, the Ockhamist allows for an agent (sometimes) to bring it about that God held a different belief from the one He actually held, since to do so is simply to bring about a temporally impure proposition about the past. Gale claims that I have argued that in the context of God's prior beliefs, to bring about an impure proposition about the past implies that one bring about a pure proposition about the past, which is ruled out on the Ockhamist's own assumptions. Further, Gale suggests a characterization of the problematic distinction between temporally pure and impure propositions, to which he refers in laying out the alleged structure of my argument against Ockhamism.

For example, Gale claims that I argue that if an agent can bring it about that God believed at t_1 that p (a temporally impure proposition, insofar as p is assumed to pertain to the future relative to t_1), then he can bring it about that someone believed at t_1 that p (a temporally pure proposition). Here Gale supposes that my inference depends on a principle expressing the closure of "brings it about that ___" under deduction. Additionally, Gale imagines that God is Bob's favorite object. Now if an agent can bring it about



that God believed at t_1 that p , then this agent can bring it about that Bob's favorite object believed at t_1 that p (a temporally pure proposition). Gale supposes that my inference here depends on a principle stating that "core-reporting propositions are inter-substitutable *salve veritate*," and thus are so inter-substitutable within the context of "brings it about that ___".

Finally, Gale points out that I assume (for the sake of my argument) that God's believing that p involves God's mind being in a representational state S . He points out that I argue that if an agent can bring it about that God believes at t_1 that p , then the agent can bring it about that God's mind is in representational state S at t_1 . Gale states that God's mind's being at t_1 in representational state S is a pure proposition (relative to t_1). Again, he contends that my inference depends on a principle of closure of "brings it about that ___", where the closure here pertains to co-reporting propositions.

In the above cases, Gale rejects the allegedly problematic results by rejecting the inferences; he contends that "brings it about that ___" is an opaque context, and thus the inferences in question are invalid. In reply I would first point out that I do *not* consider the results mentioned by Gale genuinely problematic for the Ockhamist. This is because I do not believe that the relevant propositions (such as the proposition that someone believes at t_1 that p) are genuinely temporally pure (in the relevant contexts). This calls into question Gale's account of the distinction between pure and impure propositions, to the extent that his account seems to imply that at least his first two putatively problematic propositions are pure. Further, I shall point out that my pattern of argumentation against Ockhamism does *not* need to employ any sort of problematic inference concerning "bringing it about that ___"; for example, the argument can be developed simply employing facts about the relationship between counterfactuals and "can-claims" (claims about the relevant sort of freedom).

Suppose that an agent can bring it about that God believed at t_1 that p . Does it follow that this agent can bring it about that someone believed at t_1 that p ? It is not obvious, since there may be others who so believed at t_1 , and the mere fact that the agent can perform an action sufficient for the obtaining of some proposition cannot imply that the agent can bring about that proposition, on Gale's own account. (After all, Gale says, "If 'brings it about that ___' were closed under deduction, it would follow that, since a necessary proposition is entailed by any proposition, I can bring it about that $2+2=4$ if I can bring it about that any proposition is true," a fact Gale takes to be a *reductio* of the closure claim.)

But grant that (in a certain context) the agent can indeed bring it about that someone believed at t_1 that p by bringing it about that God so believed. My view is that this is no problem for the Ockhamist, since in the circumstances the someone in question is God. That is, in the relevant context, "Someone believed at t_1 that p " is indeed a temporally impure proposition, because it is made true by God's so believing. Any account of the temporally pure/impure distinction that does not capture this intuition (such as Gale's) is inadequate.¹ A similar point applies to "Bob's favorite object believed at t_1 that p ." Thus far, in my view, there is no problem for Ockhamism, nor any problem for the relevant inference principles involving "brings it about that ___".

Note that I distinguish between two conceptions of "God." If "God" is taken to be a role term, and "Yahweh" names the individual who actually—but not necessarily—occupies this role, then I claim that "God believed at t_1 that p " is a "hard-core soft fact."² Put in Gale's framework, this implies that in the relevant sort of context, if an agent can perform an act which is such that if he were to perform it, God would have believed at t_1 that p , then the agent can perform an act which is such that if he were to perform it, Yahweh would have believed at t_1 that p . In the relevant context, then, the agent would be so acting that some genuinely pure proposition (about the past) would have obtained.

So suppose that p states the actual truth about how an agent will behave at a time subsequent to t_1 . If the agent nevertheless can do otherwise, then he can perform some action which is such that if he were to perform it, Yahweh would not have believed at t_1 that p . The above is enough to generate my argument; the only resources I use are facts about counterfactuals and their relationship to "can-claims," and *not* inferences involving "brings it about that ___". The basic intuition that drives my argument here is that no one has it in his power at a given time t so to act that some temporally pure fact about a time prior to t which actually obtained would not have obtained.³ (If, on the other hand, "God" is taken to be a name of an individual who essentially has the Divine Attributes, then I claim that "God believed at t_1 that p " is a "hard-type soft fact."⁴ I will explain this in what follows, as it applies to Gale's argument about my conception of God's beliefs as involving representational states.)

Gale points out that my argument assumes what he calls the "quite dubious" proposition that God cannot have a belief unless his mind is in some sort of representational state. I grant that this assumption is contentious. I would suggest however that this assumption specifies a significant way in which God's beliefs and human beliefs might be thought to be similar; when one gives it up, one at least moves toward a notion of Divine belief that is so different from human belief as (arguably) to involve a different sense. And one of Nelson Pike's main contentions was that his argument showed the incompatibility of God's prior beliefs and human free action, where God is said to have beliefs in the *same sense* as humans.⁵

Gale says that I claim that if God's believing at t_1 that p is identical with God's mind at t_1 being in representational state S , then if an agent can bring it about that God believed at t_1 that p , then the agent can bring it about that God's mind at t_1 is in S . Gale further claims that this latter fact is temporally pure.

I do not know why Gale supposes that the proposition that God's mind at t_1 is in a representational state S (a state that represents the world as being such as to render p true) is temporally pure. It would seem that both intuitively and on his own criterion, this would turn out to be a temporally impure fact, on the assumption that "God" is the name of an individual who possesses the Divine Attributes essentially. (Absent this assumption, even the proposition that God believed at t_1 that p would turn out to be pure.) So as yet there is no problem for Ockhamism.

The problem comes from noting that in the relevant sort of context, if an agent can perform an act which is such that if he were to perform it, God

would believe at t_1 that p , then the agent can perform an act which is such that if he were to perform it, God would at t_1 have the property, "believing that p ." Further, it is my contention that this property is a "temporally pure" property. That is, I make a distinction between *properties* that is parallel to the temporally pure/impure distinction among propositions.⁶ So in the relevant sort of context, an agent's so acting that God believed at t_1 that p would require his so acting that God had some temporally pure property at t_1 . And, as above, if an agent can (at some time subsequent to t_1) do other than he actually does, then he can perform some action which is such that if he were to perform it, God would have had a different temporally pure property at t_1 from what he actually had. Again, this is all I need for my argument against Ockhamism (on the current assumption about "God"). The argument is generated by facts about counterfactuals and their relationships to "can-claims," together with the distinction between pure and impure properties. The basic intuition that drives my argument here is that no one has it in his power at a given time t so to act that some individual would have had at a time prior to t some temporally pure property that he did not actually have.

An important point that comes out of the above discussion is that the argument for incompatibilism, as I interpret it, does *not* in the first instance exploit the impossibility of backward causation. It was perhaps unfortunate that Pike employed the locution, "brings it about that ___" which can seem to suggest backward causation, where the relevant proposition is about the past. Rather, the argument, properly interpreted, exploits the fact that no agent can so act that the past would have been different from the way it actually was; that is, no agent can perform an act which is such that, if he were to perform it, the past would have been different from the way it actually was. If the (relevant) backtracking counterfactual is true, then the associated "can-claim" must be false. Thus a proponent of the argument need not be committed to what Gale takes to be problematic inference rules concerning "brings it about that ___".

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NOTES

1. Further, any account of the distinction which can do the work it needs to do in the arguments concerning the relationship between God's foreknowledge and human freedom must capture the notion of how a more abstract proposition (such as one involving quantification) is made true.

2. John Martin Fischer, *The Metaphysics of Free Will: An Essay on Control* (Oxford, U.K. and Cambridge, Ma.: Blackwell Publishers, 1994), pp. 115-117.

3. For a full development of the argument, see John Martin Fischer, "Scotism," *Mind* 94 (1985), pp. 231-43; and *The Metaphysics of Free Will*, esp. p. 63.

4. Fischer, *The Metaphysics of Free Will*, pp. 117-128.

5. Nelson Pike, "Of God and Freedom: A Rejoinder," *Philosophical Review* 75 (1966), pp. 369-379. I do not claim that it is obvious that sameness of sense of belief between God and human beings requires the assumption. Note, however, that if one gives up the assumption in the text and accepts some sort of

“direct apprehension model” of God’s knowledge, then one must countenance pervasive backward causation; for a discussion of this point, see John Martin Fischer, “Critical Notice of Jordan Howard Sobel, *Puzzles for the Will* (forthcoming), *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*.

6. For an attempt at giving an account of this distinction, see John Martin Fischer, “Hard-Type Soft Facts,” *Philosophical Review* 95 (1986), pp. 591-601. There are critical discussions in : David Widerker, “Two Forms of Fatalism,” in J.M. Fischer, ed., *God, Foreknowledge, and Freedom* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989), pp. 97-110; and “Troubles With Ockhamism,” *Journal of Philosophy* 87 (1990), pp. 462-80. For a response to Widerker, including an improved specification of the distinction, see John Martin Fischer, “Hard Properties,” *Faith and Philosophy* 10 (1993), pp. 161-9.