Presentism and Ockham's Way Out[†]

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Presentism is, roughly, the thesis that only present objects exist; *eternalism* is, roughly, the thesis that past, present, and future objects exist. *Ockham's way out* purports to be a way out of fatalist arguments for the impossibility of free action. Fatalist arguments come in two varieties: logical and theological. Arguments for logical fatalism run something like this:[1]

Let t_{-1B} = a time that obtained exactly 1 billion years ago.

Let p_S abbreviate: one billion years after t_{-1B}, S will perform A.

Let q_S abbreviate: p_S was true at t_{-1B}.

Let r_S abbreviate: S performs A now.

Let t_S abbreviate: it is now exactly one billion years after t_{-1B}.

1. $(q_S \ \& \ t_S)$ is true, and S does not have, and never had, any choice about $(q_S \ \& \ t_S)$.

2. $\Box \ [(q_S \ \& \ t_S) \supset r_S]$.

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[1] Those familiar with the literature on fatalism will note that fatalist arguments more commonly open with a premise like this:

(1*) It is true at t_{-1B} that S performs A at t and S does not have, and never had, any choice about the proposition that it is true at t_{-1B} that S performs A at t.

And, of course, subsequent premises would then have to be modified accordingly. For present purposes, however, we have chosen to work with a 'presentist-friendly' version of the standard fatalist argument—that is, a version that takes tense seriously and that doesn't implicitly presuppose (as 1* does—for example, by employing the locution 'it is true at t_{-1B}') that non-present times exist.

3. Therefore, r_S is true and S does not have, and never had, any choice about r_S.

Arguments for theological fatalism are similar, but they replace q_S with something like:

k_S: God knew at t_{-1B} that p_S was true.

They then go on to derive the same conclusion: that for any agent S and act A, S does not have, and never had, any choice about the proposition that S performs A. Of course, it is trivially true that if an agent does not have and never had a choice about the proposition that she performs a particular act, then the agent does not perform the act freely. So, the fatalist's conclusion is that no agent acts freely.

Ockham's way out of the problem of fatalism is of interest to *libertarians* with respect to the metaphysics of free will. A libertarian is one who accepts the theses that: (a) agents perform free acts in the actual world and (b) agents cannot perform free acts if determinism is true.[2] Non-libertarians who accept (a) accept *compatibilism*, where compatibilism is the thesis that (c) even if determinism is true, agents might perform free acts.   Fatalist arguments present no special problem for compatibilists.   Whatever considerations can be marshaled in support of the position that:

(C)   An agent S might act freely even if the combination of the state of the world in the distant past and the laws of nature is inconsistent with S's acting other than she does.

can also be marshaled in support of the position that:

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[2] Determinism is the thesis that the proposition P0 that expresses the complete state of the world at some time in the distant past (at, say, t_{-1B}) and the proposition L that expresses the entirety of the laws of nature entails every true proposition whatever—including, of course, every proposition about which acts agents perform at various times.

(C*)   An agent S might act freely even if the past truth of future contingents[3] is inconsistent with S's acting other than she does.

as well as the position that:

(C**)   An agent S might act freely even if divine foreknowledge[4] of S's act is inconsistent with S's acting other than she does.

So, the proponent of free will who needs a way out of fatalism is the libertarian.

What way out does Ockham offer? Ockham offers us a distinction between *hard facts* and *soft facts* about the past. While the distinction is somewhat difficult to characterize, the rough idea is that a hard fact about the past is *entirely* about the past whereas a soft fact is not: a hard fact about, say, t_{-1B} is a fact whose obtaining is entirely independent of whatever might happen after t_{-1B}, whereas a soft fact about t_{-1B} somehow depends on, involves, or includes events that take place at later times.[5] This distinction is supposed to help the libertarian respond to the fatalist by allowing her to insist that past facts about future contingents, as well as past facts about divine foreknowledge, are soft, and therefore dependent in some way upon events that lie in their future. Once this dependence is granted, there is no longer any clear obstacle to saying that present agents can have a choice about such facts.

Some will find Ockhamism incredible. And why not? At first blush, the view seems to imply that agents have the power to change the past. Ockhamists say that their view implies no such power. But even if they are right about this, their insistence that facts about the past can depend in some way upon the present acts of purportedly free agents might, all by itself, seem

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[3] The relevant 'future contingent' in our argument is p_S. The argument from logical fatalism is sometimes referred to as the argument from future contingents.

[4] k_S is a proposition about divine foreknowledge: God knows that S will perform A 1 billion years before she does so. The argument from theological fatalism is sometimes called the argument from, or problem of, divine foreknowledge.

[5] For a good start into the literature on Ockhamism and the hard-fact/soft-fact distinction, see John Martin Fischer (ed.), *God, Freedom, and Foreknowledge* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989).

problematic enough. Our goal in this paper is to show that whether this claim is problematic depends crucially on whether presentism or eternalism is true.

We will proceed as follows: In the next section, we will lay out the fatalist's argument more clearly, making sure to clarify which dialectical moves are available to the libertarian. We will then offer a more robust presentation of Ockhamism, responding to obvious objections and teasing out the implications of the view. At this point, we will discuss presentism and eternalism in more detail. We will then present our argument for the claim that the libertarian cannot take Ockham's way out of the fatalism argument unless she rejects presentism. Finally, we will consider and dispense with objections to our argument. In the end, it ought to be clear that the libertarian must make a choice between Ockham's way out and presentism.

I. Fatalism

There is a great deal of debate about whether the two types of fatalist argument are logically equivalent: some say that they are, while others insist that the theological argument is stronger. Given that we are arguing that the presentist libertarian cannot use Ockham's way out of fatalism, and given that no one seems to think that the logical fatalist argument is more difficult to quash than its theological analogue, we will hereafter focus our attention on the logical fatalist version of the argument. Moreover, we will hereafter drop the "logical" qualifier and use the terms "fatalism" and "fatalist argument" to refer to the logical versions of each.

The fatalist argument as we have presented it relies on two premises and a somewhat controversial rule of inference. We will first consider the rule of inference, then the premises, in order to see which avenues of response are available for the libertarian confronted with the fatalist argument.

We can present the rule of inference more elegantly if we employ the following abbreviation:

N_S p abbreviates: p and S does not have, and never had, any choice about

whether p is true.

With this, it becomes clear that the fatalist relies on the following inference principle (substituting (q_S & t_S) and r_S for p and q, respectively):

$[N_S$ p & $\Box(p \supset q)]$ entails N_S q.

This sort of principle will be familiar to participants in the debate over the compatibility of causal determinism and free action. In his famed "Modal Version of the Consequence Argument" for the incompatibility of determinism and free action, Peter van Inwagen stipulates that:

N p abbreviates: p and no one has, or ever had, any choice about whether

p is true.

He then introduces "Principle β", the rule of inference according to which:

(β)   [N p & N (p $\supset$ q)] entails N q.

Though van Inwagen's original β is demonstrably invalid, many "β-style" inference principles are on offer and, at the very least, the following principle has remained immune to counter-example:

($\beta_\Box$)   [N p & $\Box(p \supset q)$] entails N q.

Principle $\beta_\Box$ is relevantly similar to the inference principle we employed in presenting the fatalist's argument. Granted, our presentation of the fatalist's argument relies on a version of β that relativizes the N-operator to a particular agent S. However, the fatalist's rule of inference is clearly of the "β-style." We will christen it "$\beta_{S,\Box}$":

$(\beta_{S,\Box})$ $[N_S\, p\ \&\ \Box(p \supset q)]$ entails $N_S\, q$

Given that $\beta_\Box$ is valid only if $\beta_{S,\Box}$ is, libertarians-qua-incompatiblists who are inclined to accept $\beta_\Box$ ought to be inclined to accept $\beta_{S,\Box}$ as well. But it is a vexed question whether the libertarian-qua-incompatiblist must endorse the modal version of the Consequence Argument, let alone $\beta_\Box$. For this reason, it is fortunate that the issue is irrelevant in the present context. Our purpose in this paper is to consider Ockham's way out of fatalism and Ockham's way out does not depend on a denial of the validity of β-style inference principles. It is worth noting, though, that $\beta_{S,\Box}$ certainly *seems* to be valid and that, given its association with arguments for the incompatibilist component of libertarianism, it would seem to be in the libertarian's best interest to find a way out of fatalism that does not require a rejection of that principle..

Since Ockham's way out does not involve a rejection of Principle $\beta_{S,i}$'s validity, it obviously involves a rejection of one of the fatalist's premises. Moreover, the Ockhamist-qua-Ockhamist has no objection to either the first conjunct of the fatalist's first premise:

1a. $(q_S\ \&\ t_S)$ is true (i.e., the conjunction of the proposition that it was true at t_{-1B} that

   one billion years after $t_{-1B,}$ S will perform A and the proposition that it is

   exactly one billion years after t_{-1B} is true).

Or to the second premise of the fatalist's argument:

2. $\Box\,[(q_S\ \&\ t_S) \supset r_S]$

While some libertarians reject both 1a and 2 on the grounds that the locution "true at t_{-1B}" is nonsensical, and other libertarians reject 1a on the grounds that q_s is false given that bivalence fails for future-tensed propositions, neither strategy is part of Ockham's way out. Ockham's way out of fatalism is to assert the falsity of the second conjunct of the fatalist's first premise:

1b. S does not have, and never had, any choice about $(q_S\ \&\ t_S)$.

Moreover, the Ockhamist thinks that S has, or had, a choice about the truth of the conjunction (q_S & t_S) in virtue of the fact that S has, or had, a choice about the truth of q_S: it is no part of the Ockhamist's position to assert that an agent has, had, or might have a choice about the passage of time.

In the next section, we will explain the Ockhamist's strategy in some detail, dispensing with the obvious objections along the way. But first we must offer a few words about the locution 'S has a choice about whether p is true' or, what is the same thing, 'S has a choice about whether it is true that p.' We take it as trivially true that S has a choice about whether it is true that p if and only if:

    a. S is able to render p false.

    b. S can render p false.

    c. S has the power to render p false.

And:

    d. S has power over the truth value of p.

This assumption is standard both in the free will literature generally and in the literature on fatalism in particular. Given this, and given that it will be far easier to explain the Ockhamist's position if we talk in terms of the ability to render a proposition false rather than in terms of having a choice about a proposition, we will employ the former terminology from here on out. Thus, for example, instead of focusing on the Ockhamist's denial of:

    1b. S does not have, and never had, any choice about (q_S & t_S).

we will instead focus our attention on the Ockhamist's denial of the equivalent proposition that:

    1b*. S does not have, and never had, the power to render (q_S & t_S) false.

II.   Ockham's Way Out

As we have just seen, Ockham's way out of the fatalist argument is to reconcile the affirmation of:

1a. (q_S & t_S) is true.

With a denial of:

1b*. S does not have, and never had, the power to render (q_S & t_S) false.

Given that the Ockhamist does not attribute to S any power over the passage of time, it might seem that 1a and the denial of 1b* are reconcilable only if agents have the power to change the past; however, the Ockhamist emphatically denies that this is so. Indeed, the very heart of Ockhamism is the insistence that there is an analysis of 'power to render a proposition false' such that an agent might have this power over q_S without having the ability to change the past.

When Ockhamists give an analysis of the power to render a proposition false, they offer something relevantly similar to this:

(P)   S has the power to render p false only if there is an action X such that (i) S has the power to perform X and (ii) necessarily, if S performs X, then p is false.[6]

We can see how this analysis of 'S has the power to render P false' aids the Ockhamist's response to the fatalist if we recall our terminological stipulations:

p_S = the proposition that, one billion years after $t_{-1B,}$ S will perform A.

q_S = the proposition that p_S was true at t_{-1B}.

Given this, it obviously follows that the affirmation of the following proposition entails the denial of the fatalist's (1b*):

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[6] While there may be some Ockhamists who would prefer to tweak this analysis a bit, a commitment to Ockhamism requires a commitment to an analysis of 'power to render P false' that is relevantly similar to that given in (P). We will thus proceed on the assumption that (P) is part of the Ockhamist's response to the fatalist: nothing of any importance will hinge on the details of this particular analysis of 'power to render false'.

(O) S has the power to render q_S false.

Moreover, if the Ockhamist cashes out (O) by applying the analysis of 'power to render p false' given in (P), the Ockhamist denial of (1b*) amounts to an affirmation of:

(O*)   There is an action X such that (i) S has the power to perform X

and (ii) necessarily, if S performs X, then q_S is false.

Obviously enough, the relevant act X will be some act distinct from A—perhaps the very act of refraining from A—such that S's performance of X entails that S refrains from performing A one billion years after t_{-1B}. So, according to the Ockhamist, because S performs A now, it is and always has been the case that, at t_{-1B}, it was true that S will perform A exactly one billion years later. However, S has both the power to perform A and the power to refrain from performing A; and given the latter power, S therefore also has the power to render q_S false—*contra* 1b*. Thus, 1b* is false.

And now the distinction between hard and soft facts becomes relevant. Recall that hard facts about the past are, roughly, facts that obtain wholly independently of whatever events lie in their future; soft facts are facts that are not so independent. According to the Ockhamist, q_S expresses a soft fact about the past; for the truth of q_S depends partly on the way in which S exercises her power now, one billion years after t_{-1B}. But if the truth of q_S depends partly on what S does now, then there is no clear obstacle to saying that S has the power to render q_S false. To be sure, this is no argument for the conclusion that S *does* have this power; but offering such an argument is not the Ockhamist's goal. Ockhamism is entirely a defensive maneuver.[7] And,

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[7] For this reason, there is nothing question-begging in the Ockhamist's strategy. She cannot be accused of assuming what she is trying to prove because she is not trying to prove anything. Rather, her strategy is simply to assume what the fatalist denies—that S has the power to perform some act other than A—and to expose the fact that the fatalist still has not offered any reason for thinking that S lacks precisely those powers that she must possess in order for that assumption to be true.

at this juncture in the dialectic, if the fatalist wants to carry on with her insistence that S lacks that power, she owes the Ockhamist further argument.

What more can the fatalist offer? The only way forward is to try to defend 1b*—or, more to the point, to defend the truth of the claim that the Ockhamist denies:

1b*$_{qs}$ S does not have, and never had the power to render q_S false.

Toward doing so, the fatalist can begin by noting that all parties to the debate will admit that:

i. q_S is a proposition that expresses a fact about the past—indeed, a fact about t_{-1B}, a time 1 billion years prior to the present time.

But (i) implies:

ii. q_S was true before S came into existence.

Moreover, the Ockhamist herself will agree that:

iii. q_S cannot change its truth value.

But surely, the fatalist will say, nothing could be more obvious than that (ii) and (iii) imply:

1b*$_{qs}$ S does not have, and never had the power to render q_S false.

This is the pith of the fatalist's support for 1b*$_{qs}$: S did not exist at t_{-1B} and q_S is (and has been, at least since t_{-1B}) unchangeably true.[8] But if an agent did not yet exist when a proposition was (already) unchangeably true, the agent cannot have (and can never have had) the power to render the proposition false. Thus, if q_S was true a billion years before S ever existed, and if q_S has been unchangeably true for as long as it has been true at all, then S does not have, and never has had, the power to render q_S false. Hence, 1b*$_{qs}$ is true.

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[8] Whether q_S was true—and unchangeably so—prior to t_{-1B} depends on how seriously one wants to take the tense of the verb in q_S. Out of respect for the presentist position, we are throughout taking tense as seriously as possible.

Given that the Ockhamist assents to (ii) and (iii), the dialectical standoff is this: the Ockhamist rejects the inference from (ii) and (iii) to $(1b*_{qs})$; the fatalist takes the opposite view. So, the issue, then, is which of the following two claims is more plausible:

I.   (ii) and (iii) imply $(1b*_{qs})$

or

II.   S has the power to perform an act other than A.

In the next section, we will argue that the Ockhamist can easily reject (I) in favor of (II) provided that she is an eternalist. We will further argue that if the Ockhamist commits to presentism, her position is untenable. Thus, we will conclude that if libertarians want to employ Ockham's way out as a way of responding to fatalist arguments, they must abandon presentism.

III.   Presentism, Eternalism, and Ockham's Way Out

As we have said, presentism is (roughly) the thesis that only present objects exists while eternalism is (again, roughly) the thesis that everything that ever did or ever will exist does exist. A more precise expression of presentism is: it has always been and always will be the case that there are no actual but non-present objects.[9]   Eternalism can be more precisely characterized as the thesis that past, present, and future objects (and, by extension, events) exist; the phrase "everything that exists" refers not only to things that occupy the present time, but also to objects that occupy past and future times. According to the eternalist, past, present, future events bear relations of *earlier-than, simultaneous-with,* and *later-than* to one another, but each time has the

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[9] The 'always' quantifier is added so that presentism does not turn out to be true at the beginning of time (if time had a beginning) and false thereafter. The actuality qualifier is added so that presentism does not imply the falsity of David Lewis's brand of possibilism, according to which there are objects that do not exist in the actual world and therefore do not exist in our present time by virtue of not existing in our spacetime at all.   Given that we are assuming that every event involves an object, we take it that insofar as presentists and their rivals differ about the existence of past and future objects they also differ about the existence of past and future events. We also assume that every event with non-zero duration is composed of momentary events.

same ontological status. So, on the presentist view, all of reality—all that exists simpliciter—is what exists now, whereas on the eternalist view, what exists simpliciter includes everything that exists at every time.

But what is a "time"? The literature on presentism and eternalism includes at least two different ways of answering this question. On the one hand, times may be thought of as abstract states of affairs; on the other hand, they may be thought of as concrete events. Abstract times are analogous to abstract possible worlds. Abstract times might fruitfully be thought of as *present-tense maximal* states of affairs. Intuitively, and very roughly, a present-tense maximal state of affairs is a total state of the world at an instant, *minus* all of the past- and future-tense truths. More rigorously: Say that a state of affairs S is *future directed* just in case either S's obtaining entails that some contingent thing will exist or S's obtaining entails that no contingent thing will exist; and then define a *past-directed* state of affairs in the obviously parallel way.[10] Then a state of affairs S is present-tense maximal if and only if, for every atomic state of affairs S* that is neither future-directed nor past-directed, either S includes S* or S precludes S*.[11] A concrete time might then be thought of as the event of some particular abstract state of affairs obtaining.

For convenience, we will assume that times are concrete events. On this assumption, the presentist denies that there are past or future times whereas the eternalist says that there are. And now let us begin to consider how the eternalist and the presentist each fare when confronted with the fatalist's argument.

Recall that the Ockhamist must explain why:

ii. q_S was true before S came into existence.

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[10] 'Contingent things' might be objects or events; and we assume that an event exists when and only when it occurs.
[11] We shall assume that states of affairs that include laws of nature will not be atomic. One state of affairs includes another just in case the obtaining of the first state of affairs entails the obtaining of the second. One state of affairs precludes another just in case the obtaining of the first entails that the second does not obtain.

and

       iii. q_S cannot change its truth value.

fail to imply

      $1b*_{qs}$ S does not have, and never had the power to render q_S false.

The eternalist Ockahmist blocks this inference by pointing out that it seems plausible only if one assumes the truth of the suppressed premise that:

      ii*. q_S was true before S came into existence only if there was a time t* such that (a) q_S was true at t*, and (b) it was false at t* and at every time prior to t* that S exists.

The eternalist Ockhamist then points out that the truth of eternalism implies that, given that there is some time or other at which it is true that S exists, condition (b) in (ii*) cannot be satisfied.

Moreover, the eternalist Ockhamist can go on to point out that, just as it has always been true that S performs A one billion years later than t_{-1B}, so too it has always been true that S exists. To say that S did not exist at t_{-1B} is not to say that, at t_{-1B} it was false that S exists. Rather, it is just to say that none of the events of S's life are located at t_{-1B}. Thus, given that it was true at t_{-1B} that S exists, it is hard to see any obstacle to saying that the truth of q_S is ontologically dependent on S's actual performance of A at the present time. Indeed, from an eternalist point of view, q_S is quite plausibly viewed as just an alternative (if rather oblique) way of expressing the conjunction of r_S and t_S: i.e., S performs A now and it is now one billion years after than t_{-1B}. And since everyone will agree that it is plausible to say that the truth of this latter proposition depends on what S does (in particular, r_S clearly depends on S) , rather than the other way around, so too everyone should agree that q_S depends on what S does.

Thus, the eternalist Ockhamist can tell the following story: since q_S depends for its truth value on what S actually does at the present time, it makes perfect sense to say that S performs A freely and that S has (or had) the power to render q_S false. S's performing A at t is, we might say, "ontologically prior," even if not temporally prior, to the truth (at t_{-1B}) of the proposition that S will perform A one billion years later than t_{-1B}. Thus, on this way of thinking about why the inference from (ii) and (iii) to ($1b*_{qs}$) fails, the fatalist simply gets things the wrong way around: the fatalist assumes that since the truth (at t_{-1B}) of 'S will perform A one billion years later than t_{-1B}' is temporally prior to S's performance of A, its truth is ontologically prior as well; but this is precisely what the eternalist Ockhamist denies[12].

Of course, it would be nice if the eternalist Ockhamist could give a thorough explication of the notions of "ontological dependence" and "ontological priority" that figure in her response to the fatalist. As it is, it is simply not clear whether such dependence or priority is best thought of in terms of explanation, or supervenience, or causation, or what. But it seems that, in the present case, the eternalist Ockhamist need not work this out completely. Indeed, it seems that she can point out that, ordinarily, we do not think that the truth of the proposition that S performs A is ontologically prior to S's performance of A. Indeed, we are fully prepared, in the ordinary case, to think that the proposition that S performs A is ontologically dependent on S's performance of A and, moreover, that S's performance of A is ontologically prior to the truth of the proposition that S performs A. The eternalist Ockhamist's point is that, however we ordinarily understand the relationship between true propositions about agents' actions and the

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[12] Of course, the eternalist Ockhamist need not deny that there are concrete events that are both temporally *and* ontologically prior to other events. For instance, the eternalist Okchamist need not deny that there are causal events that are both temporally and ontologically prior to their effects. Indeed, the eternalist Ockhamist qua eternalist Ockhamist is not committed to any unusual claims about the relations between concrete events. What sets her apart is her conception of the relationship between the truth value of contingently true propositions and the concrete events on which their truth values depend.

agents' actions themselves, this is how we should understand the relationship between true propositions like q_S and S's performance of A at t. The action comes first, in some ontologically significant sense of "first", and the truth of the proposition succeeds it.

Note too that the eternalist Ockhamist can make her points about the ontological dependence of past truths like q_S on present acts of free agents in any number of ways. If she relies on the distinction between hard and soft facts, she can say that the course of concrete events (including, for instance, S's performance of A) consists in hard facts, while soft facts include true propositions about which concrete events occur; she can then add that soft facts are ontologically posterior to and dependent on the hard facts. Moreover, the eternalist Ockhamist might offer, as a heuristic device, the image of two "levels" of reality: first, there's the level of hard facts, which includes the concrete events that bear relations of temporal simultaneity, priority and posteriority to one another; then there is the level of reality that includes soft facts about which concrete events take place at various points along the temporal continuum. Hovering above the level of reality that consists in the course of concrete events is the level of reality that consists of the propositions that describe what is happening "down below." Both the first and second "levels" of reality exist simpliciter, and the second is ontologically dependent on and posterior to the first.

Alternatively, the eternalist Ockahmist might think in terms of two distinct "ontological moments": what's ontologically "first" is the moment that includes all the concrete events and the relations of temporal simultaneity, priority, and posteriority that they bear to one another; what's ontologically "second" is the moment at which all the contingent propositions about the course of concrete events are true. But we must not allow this notion of ontological moments to confuse us: on the eternalist scheme, every concrete event that ever takes place in the course of

history exists simpliciter just as every true proposition that describes the concrete course of events has its truth value simpliciter. On this scheme, a principle of unrestricted bivalence holds at all times, and every true contingent proposition is ontologically dependent on the course concrete events that exists simpliciter.

At this point, we hope that it is obvious that the presentist Ockhamist cannot tell the same story as the eternalist about the failure of the inference from:

ii. q_S was true before S came into existence.

and

iii. q_S cannot change its truth value.

to

1b*$_{qs}$ S does not have, and never had, the power to render q_S false.

The presentist, after all, insists that the only time that exists simpliciter is the present time. She believes that the only concrete events that exist simpliciter are the events that are currently taking place and the only concrete objects that exist simpliciter are those that exist now; she cannot abide an ontological distinction between what exists simpliciter and what exists at the present time. So, according to the presentist, S's performance of A exists only if S is performing A at the present time. Since the presentist denies that S's performing A exists when other times—times at which S is not performing A—are present, she obviously cannot say that the truth value of q_S depends on anything that S is doing or has done. For, again, q_S was true (and unchangeably so) nearly a billion years before S ever existed; so its truth value does not depend on S's existence. Moreover, it seems clear that if presentism is true, then temporal priority implies ontological priority. So, not only are earlier events ontologically prior to later events, but the truth of propositions true at earlier times is ontologically prior to later events.

The presentist, therefore, must affirm the suppressed premise that the eternalist denied:

ii*. q_S was true before S came into existence only if there was a time t* such that (a) q_S was true at t*, and (b) it was false at t* and at every time prior to t* that S exists.

But (ii), (ii*) and (iii) together seem to imply:

iv. The unchangeable truth of q_S is temporally prior to and therefore ontologically prior to S's existence.

Moreover, it obviously follows from (iv) that:

iv*. The unchangeable truth of q_S does not depend on S or any of S's actions.

And it is difficult to deny that:

v*. If the unchangeable truth value of q_S does not depend on S or anything that S does, S does not have the power to render q_S false.

But, of course, (iv*) and (v*) together imply $1b*_{qs}$. Thus, in short, the truth of (iv) seems to lead ineluctably to the truth of $1b*_{qs}$. Given that this is so, and given that Ockham's way out of fatalism depends crucially on S's having the power to render q_S false, the presentist Ockhamist must deny the truth of (iv).

But to deny the truth of (iv) is to affirm the truth of:

(M) Possibly: there is a time t, proposition p, and agent S such that at t, S has the power to render p false, and S does not exist at t.

Meinongians may not balk at M's clear implication that non-existent things can be quantified over and can have and even exercise powers; but the rest of us will. And if it turns out that presentists can ward off fatalist arguments only by becoming Meinongians, most of us will be

inclined to say, "So much the worse for presentism." At any rate, so *we* say. Thus we conclude that presentists cannot, in the end, rely on the Ockhamist strategy as a way out of fatalism.

IV.   An Objection

But is this really fair to the presentist?   After all, presentists have developed various strategies for accommodating the truth of sentences that apparently make reference to merely past or merely future objects; and they have likewise developed strategies for making sense of apparent assertions of cross-time relations (such as causal relations). So a natural thought at this junction is that perhaps these same strategies might help presentists who are attracted to Ockhamism to avoid the sorts of objections that we have been lodging against the conjunction of those two positions.

Perhaps the most promising strategy for accommodating the sorts of sentences just mentioned is what might be called the 'essence strategy'. We will briefly consider what this strategy amounts to and how it might be adapted as a response to the fatalist. We will then argue that the essence strategy fails to provide the presentist Ockhamist with a satisfactory response to the fatalist's argument. Though we acknowledge that there are other strategies on offer for accommodating apparent reference to merely past and future objects and for making room for apparent assertions of cross-time relations, we omit consideration of these because they all strike us as being subject to the same sorts of objections that we will raise against the essence strategy.

The essence strategy is just an extension of a familiar strategy for handling apparently problematic modal claims like:

(L) Possibly, David Letterman does not exist.

On the standard semantics for modal claims, L implies:

(L*) There is a possible world in which it is true that David Letterman does not exist.

The trouble, however, is that it looks as if the proposition that Letterman does not exist *cannot* be true in any world because in worlds where Letterman does not exist, he is not available to be a subject of predication. In other words: the proposition that Letterman does not exist is true only if it about Letterman; but if it is about Letterman, then it cannot be true; for only existing things can stand in relations (and 'aboutness' is a relation). Thus, many philosophers are inclined to treat (L) as equivalent to not (L*) but to:

(L**) There is a possible world in which nothing exemplifies an essence of David

Letterman.

An essence of David Letterman is a property that is essential to Letterman and that cannot be exemplified by anything distinct from Letterman. The attraction of understanding (L) as equivalent to (L**) should be obvious: properties are abstract objects, so they exist necessarily; thus, they are guaranteed to be available in every world to be subjects of predications. Whereas it is deeply problematic to suppose that 'Letterman does not exist' is about Letterman himself in worlds in which that proposition is true, it is wholly unproblematic to suppose that it is instead a proposition about Letterman's essence—equivalent to something like 'Letterman's essence is not exemplified.'

So goes the essence strategy for modal claims. And, of course, the presentist can adopt it to accommodate both sentences that seem to be about merely past or future objects, as well as sentences that appear to imply that there are objects that stand in diachronic relations to one another. The trick is simple: treat the problematic sentences as equivalent to claims about (necessarily existing) essences rather than as claims about concrete objects. Thus, 'Abraham Lincoln was tall' will get treated as equivalent to something like 'The property of being identical

to Abraham Lincoln was exemplified by a tall person.' Likewise, 'Many philosophers admire Aristotle,' will get treated as equivalent to a claim about an essence of Aristotle, the causal relations between the exemplifier of that essence, things that co-existed with him, later things that co-existed with them, and, ultimately, various feelings of admiration in contemporary philosophers. The details of this story do not much matter in the context at hand. What matters for our purposes is just the basic fact that, on the essence strategy, sentences that appear to refer overtly or covertly to nonexistent "things" will get treated as expressing propositions about necessarily existing properties rather than propositions about concrete objects.

The question, however, is whether the essence strategy will be of any help to the presentist in rendering plausible the claim that:

(M)   Possibly: there is a time t, proposition p, and agent S such that at t S has the power to render p false, and S does not exist at t.

Obviously the proponent of the essence strategy won't want to employ the strategy in so ham-fisted a way as to make (M) imply that S's *essence* has power over the truth value of p. For, after all, essences, being properties, can't have such powers. Rather, the most natural way of employing the strategy would be to begin by arguing that:

(R1) S has the power to render p false

is (in some contexts, anyway) equivalent to something like:

(R1$_E$) S's essence will be exemplified by something that has the power to render p false.

Likewise, then,

(E1) E does not exist

may be treated as equivalent to:

(E1$_E$) S's essence is not currently exemplified.

So, then, (M) becomes:

(M_E) Possibly: there is a time t, proposition p, and essence S_E such that it is true at t that S_E will be exemplified by something that has the power to render p false, and S_E is not exemplified at t.

Unlike (M), (M_E) carries no commitment to the claim that nonexistent "things" can have or exercise powers, or stand in relations. Thus M_E has the virtue of avoiding what was the primary objection to M.

The trouble, however, is that even if we grant that M_E is on better footing that M, we still must acknowledge that the fatalist can offer against M_E almost the exact same argument (with only minor alternations) that she offers against $1b*_{qs}$. Thus:

v. q_S was true at a time prior to S_E's being exemplified.

vi. q_S cannot change its truth value.

Therefore:

vii. S_E cannot be exemplified by something that has the power to render q_S false.

Eternalists could (if they wished) resist this argument in just the same way that they would resist the earlier argument from (ii) and (iii) to $1b*_{qs}$. But the basic problem for the presentist remains: q_S is unchangeably true *before it is ever true that S exists*; thus, it is difficult to see how S could possibly have power over the truth value of q_S. Asserting M_E—presumably with an eye to saying that it was true one billion years ago that S's essence will be exemplified by someone who has the power to render q_S false—does not demonstrate how S could have power over the truth value of q_S. Rather, it simply asserts that it can. This is not argument; it is merely contradicting the fatalist's conclusion.

So, the essence strategy seems unpromising. Again, there are other strategies upon which a presentist might try to draw; but, as we said earlier, all of those strategies are subject to similar objections. This is because every extant strategy for accommodating sentences that appear either to refer to merely past or merely future things or to posit cross-time relations between objects will share one thing common with the essence strategy: they will imply that, for times at which S does not exist, a sentence like 'at t, S has the power to render p false' is to be understood as expressing a proposition that is either (a) false; (b) about a non-existent object; or (c) about something other than S. But—for exactly the reasons discussed in our treatment of the essence strategy—none of these alternatives will issue in a translation of M that will help us to see how S could have the power to render q_S false at those times prior to S's ever having existed.

And so we conclude that eternalists are able to adopt Ockham's way out of fatalism while presentists cannot. At this point, at least one of us wishes to leave open the possibility that the presentist can offer a successful response to the fatalist's argument. But we must conclude that the response that some consider the best response available—Ockham's way out—is unavailable to the presentist.