

*On Divine Omniscience and Human Freewill: An Analysis of Nelson Pike's Argument  
of Incompatibilism*

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### *Introduction*

Nelson Pike's article entitled, "Divine Omniscience and Voluntary Action," proves that fatalism is unavoidable. Fatalism is the philosophical doctrine emphasizing the necessity of human acts rendering them involuntary. Theological fatalism is the thesis that infallible foreknowledge of a human act makes the act necessary and hence unfree, that is, if there is a being who knows infallibly the entire future, then no human act is free (SEP 2008). This is the same thesis maintained by Pike and concluded that the Christian concept of divine omniscience, which includes the power to know everything and hold no false beliefs, removed all possibility of voluntary action.

If God knows everything, then He knows all the facts about the past, present, and future. If God has knowledge of the future, then He has knowledge of the outcome of human actions prior to their performance. If God has the power to hold no false beliefs, then He can never be wrong about humans' future actions. If God has infallible knowledge of the future, then humans can never act in contrary to what God has already known and believed. If humans can never do anything in contrary to what God had already believed them to be doing, then no human action is voluntary. Therefore, according to Pike, based from these set of assumptions that he presented about God's omniscience, either we are not truly responsible for our moral actions since we have no power to do other than what God had already believed we will be doing in the future or God is not omniscient.

Pike (33-34) presented the schematic representation of his argument as follows:

1. "God existed at  $t_1$ " entails "If Jones did  $X$  at  $t_2$ , God believed at  $t_1$  that Jones would do  $X$  at  $t_2$ ."
2. "God believes  $X$ " entails " $X$  is true."
3. It is not within one's power at a given time to do something having a description that is logically contradictory.
4. It is not within one's power at a given time to do something that would bring it about that someone who held a certain belief at a time prior to the time in question did not hold that belief at the time prior to the time in question.
5. It is not within one's power at a given time to do something that would bring it about that a person who existed at an earlier time did not exist at that earlier time.
6. If God existed at  $t_1$  and if God believed at  $t_1$  that Jones would do  $X$  at  $t_2$ , then if it was within Jones's power at  $t_2$  to refrain from doing  $X$ , then (1) it was within Jones's power at  $t_2$  to do something that would have brought it about that God held a false belief at  $t_1$ , or (2) it was within Jones's power at  $t_2$  to do something which would have brought it about that God did not hold the belief He held at  $t_1$ , or (3) it was within Jones's power at  $t_2$  to do something that would have brought it about that any person who believed at  $t_1$  that Jones would do  $X$  at  $t_2$  (one of whom was, by hypothesis, God) held a false belief and thus was not God--that is, that God (who by hypothesis existed at  $t_1$ ) did not exist at  $t_1$ .
7. Alternative 1 in the consequent of item 6 is false. (from 2 and 3)
8. Alternative 2 in the consequent of item 6 is false. (from 4)
9. Alternative 3 in the consequent of item 6 is false. (from 5)
10. Therefore, if God existed at  $t_1$  and if God believed at  $t_1$  that Jones would do  $X$  at  $t_2$ , then it was not within Jones's power at  $t_2$  to refrain from doing  $X$ . (from 6 through 9).

11. Therefore, if God existed at  $t_1$ , and if Jones did  $X$  at  $t_2$ , it was not within Jones's power at  $t_2$  to refrain from doing  $X$ . (from 1 and 10).

In this paper, I shall argue, considering the set of assumptions provided by Pike about divine omniscience and the above premises, that Pike successfully proves the incompatibility of divine omniscience and human freewill. To show this, I shall analyze other attempts of reconciling divine foreknowledge and human freewill, excluding what Pike had already analyzed in his article, and prove that none of these attempts can successfully deny Pike's argument of incompatibilism unless we try to redefine the concept of divine omniscience as Pike suggested.

### *Future Indeterminacy*

In the article "re-reading Nelson Pike's "Divine Omniscience and Voluntary Action," Fischer, et al. re-examined Pike's argument and the different versions of Open Theism that offers alternative interpretation of divine omniscience and human freewill. One version of Open Theism offers the view that "the future is not "settled"; that is, there are no truths specifying how future indeterminacies will unfold (Fischer, et al. 2009: 5)." Hence, human freewill is not harmed. However, this view asserts that God's knowledge about the future is not distinct from humans as there are no truths as to how the future unfolds. Thus, just like humans, God is also clueless about what will happen in the future as the future is uncertain. This view, then, affirms the conclusion made by Pike about the incompatibility of God's foreknowledge with human freedom.

To simply put it, in this version of Open Theism it wasn't even *true* at  $t_1$  that Jones would do  $X$  at  $t_2$ , supposing Jones does  $X$  at  $t_2$  freely (Fischer, et al. 2009: 5). However, this view is still problematic if omniscience is an essential attribute of God, which Pike assumed in the formulation of his argument. As Pike (28) explains, "if the person we usually mean to be referring to when using the name "God" were suddenly to lose the quality of omniscience, the resulting person would no longer be God. Thus, Open Theism's argument, although it affirms Pike's incompatibilism thesis, cannot be a successful defense of human freewill. If we take into consideration the set of assumptions made by Pike about the essential attributes of God, to risk denying one of the essential attributes of God which is omniscience is to risk denying altogether the existence of God.

### *Hard Facts vs. Soft Facts*

Another approach discussed by Fishcer et al. (2009:5) is the Ockhamist approach advocated by (among others) Marilyn Adams and Alvin Plantinga. This version denies premise (8) in Pike's argument and offered a distinction between hard facts and soft facts. The Ockhamist's claim is that while hard facts are plausibly thought to be subject to the principle of the fixity of the past, soft facts need'nt be fixed (and thus out of control (Fishcer et al. 2009:6). The Ockhamist grants that it is not within Jone's power to do something that would have brought it about that some hard fact about the past would not have been a fact, but argues that it is within Jone's power to do something that some soft fact about the past would not have been a fact. For instance, suppose Jones mows his lawn at  $t_2$ . For the Ockhamistss, it follows that it was true at

$t1$  that Jones would mow his lawn at  $t2$ . Did Jones have it within his power at  $t2$  to refrain from mowing his lawn? For the Ockhamists, if he did, this power is the power so to act that a fact about the past—the soft fact that it was true at  $t1$  that he would be mowing his lawn—would not have been a fact (Fischer et al. 2009:6).

However, to deny premise (8) of Pike's argument is to deny the infallibility of God. The Ockhamist's distinction between hard and soft fact doesn't remove the fact that God already knows at  $t1$  what Jones will do at  $t2$ . And to say that Jones has it in his power to do something in contradictory to what God had already believed at  $t1$  that he will be doing at  $t2$  would have brought it about that God held a false belief at  $t1$ . Thus, it will also fail to resolve the incompatibility of the divine omniscience and human freewill.

### *Explanatory Dependence*

As the Ockhamist approach previously failed to elaborate the significance of the distinguishing between soft and hard facts in the discussion of God's knowledge of the future, they later appeal to a claim concerning explanatory dependence. The Ockhamist says that instead of thinking of the past fact that Jones would mow his lawn as forcing Jones to mow his lawn, or constraining what Jones has it within his power to do, think of of Jones's free decision to mow the lawn as explaining why it was true that Jones mow the lawn. In other words, for the Ockhamists, Jones' free decision to mow the lawn is the explanatory ground of the fact that, at  $t1$ , it was true that he would mow the lawn (See: Fischer, et. al. 2009: 7).

Then again, explaining Jones' action in terms of the underlying reason why Jones chose to perform that action doesn't remove the fact that even the underlying reason to Jones' performing of the action was already known and believed by God even prior to Jones' arrival at a decision. If God had already known at  $t1$  that Jones would mow his lawn at  $t2$ , God had also known at  $t1$  that Jones' would mow his lawn at  $t2$  because of the reason, say, that he sees his yard looking more like a prairie than a lawn. Therefore, if God had already known at  $t1$  that such would be the reason why Jones would mow his lawn at  $t2$ , and it is not within Jones' power at  $t2$  to do something that would have brought it about that God did not hold the belief he held at  $t1$ , then Jones' action at  $t2$  cannot have any other reason otherwise than what God had already believed him to have at  $t1$ . Therefore, this approach also fails to resolve the issue that God's knowledge of the future threatens the voluntariness of human action.

To discuss the nature of God's knowledge of the future, the Ockhamist claims that God's belief at  $t1$  that Jones would mow his lawn at  $t2$  is explanatorily dependent on Jones' free decision. Therefore, God knows about Jones' future decisions because of Jones' decision themselves (Fischer, et. al. 2009: 8). Thus, this view rejects one of the most important attributes of divine omniscience: infallibility. As Pike had pointed out in his argument, if God has knowledge at  $t1$  of Jones' action on  $t2$ , His knowledge at  $t1$  of Jones' action on  $t2$  would render it impossible for Jones to act in contrary to what he had already believed in  $t1$  Jones to be doing in  $t2$ . But for the Ockhamists, God's knowledge about our future is not hard but soft fact, and thus changeable. Thus, if God has knowledge at  $t1$  of that Jones' would mow his lawn at  $t2$  and Jones has it

in his power to act voluntarily, then he can render God's knowledge at  $t1$  false by doing at  $t2$  otherwise at than what God had already believed at  $t1$ .

### *God's Knowledge of the Indeterminacy of the Future*

Fischer, et al. develop another possible Open Theist position—the future changes and God's knowledge of the future changes as well. On this version, “there are truths specifying how indeterminate aspects of the future will unfold, *and* God knows these truths ( Fischer, et al. 2009: 14).” They maintain that:

God can know truths about the future, but the future changes: the set of future tensed truths at one time may contain *it will be the case that  $p$*  even though the set of future-tensed truths at another time may contain *it will be the case that  $\sim p$*  (Fischer, et al. 2009 14-15).

This approach, Fischer, et al. states, either denies premise (1) or premise (6) of Pike's argument. Premise (1) states that if “God existed at  $t1$ ” entails “If Jones did  $X$  at  $t2$ , God believed at  $t1$  that Jones would do  $X$  at  $t2$ .” In this version of Open Theism, however, states that if “God existed at  $t1$ ” *does not* entail “If Jones did  $X$  at  $t2$ , God believed at  $t1$  that Jones would do  $X$  at  $t2$ ” or entail “If Jones did  $X$  at  $t2$ , God believed at  $t1$  that Jones would do  $\sim X$  at  $t2$  although Jones did  $X$  at  $t2$ .” To simply put, at  $t1$  Jones wasn't going to mow his lawn at  $t2$ , even though as it turned out, Jones did mow his lawn at  $t2$ . Fischer, et al. (2009: 17) explains that in those circumstances, “God wouldn't have known at  $t1$  that Jones would do  $X$  at  $t2$  simply because that was false at  $t1$  and didn't become true until later”. At one time God knows that Jones will not mow his lawn; at a later time God know that Jones will mow his lawn.

On the other hand, denying premise (6) accepting that “it was within Jones' power to bring it about that although God still existed, and still held the same belief (which was true) at  $t1$ , God comes to hold a different belief thanks to the fact that the future has changed (Fischer, et al. 209: 17).” If such is the case, this approach, just like the *Explanatory Dependence* argument, denies the infallibility God's knowledge about the future that would render any future human action as involuntary, which only proves again the incompatibility of divine omniscience and human freewill.

### *Conclusion*

The various approaches of reconciling divine omniscience and human freewill proves Pike's point that unless the set of assumptions about God's essential omniscience are redefined, the implication it has on the (impossibility of the) voluntariness of human action will stand.

*References*

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