

# Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers

---

Volume 10 | Issue 2

Article 2

---

4-1-1993

## Hard Properties

John Martin Fischer

Follow this and additional works at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy>

---

### Recommended Citation

Fischer, John Martin (1993) "Hard Properties," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 10 : Iss. 2 , Article 2.

DOI: 10.5840/faithphil199310236

Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol10/iss2/2>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers by an authorized editor of ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange.

# HARD PROPERTIES

John Martin Fischer

Parallel to the distinction between hard (temporally non-relational) and soft (temporally relational) facts about times is the distinction between hard (temporally non-relational) and soft (temporally relational) properties. David Widerker has criticized a suggested account of the distinction between hard and soft properties. In this paper the criticism is presented and a refined suggestion for an account of the distinction is developed. I claim that this proposal avoids the problems adduced by Widerker.

## I

Incompatibilists argue that a person is never free at a time so to act that some “hard fact”—some temporally non-relational, genuine fact—about a prior time would not have been a fact. The past is, in this sense, “fixed.” Further, some incompatibilists about God’s foreknowledge and human freedom (in the sense of “freedom to do otherwise”) claim that God’s prior beliefs about human actions are *hard facts* about the times at which they are held; thus, they hold that God’s prior beliefs are fixed and hence that God’s foreknowledge is incompatible with human freedom to do otherwise.<sup>1</sup>

One approach to challenging this argument might be called “Ockhamism.”<sup>2</sup> The Ockhamist claims that God’s beliefs are not hard facts about the times at which they are held. Rather, God’s beliefs are alleged to be “soft facts”—temporally relational, non-genuine facts. (Such a fact is not fully accomplished and “over-and-done-with” at the time in question; it is not solely about the relevant time, but is about other times as well, in some suitable sense of “about.”) Further, the Ockhamist’s claim is that God’s beliefs at prior times are the *sorts* of soft facts which need not be fixed at later times. Thus the Ockhamist is a compatibilist.

I have argued, against the Ockhamist, that whereas God’s beliefs might be soft facts about the times at which they are held, they are nevertheless fixed at later times.<sup>3</sup> This is because a fact such as that God believes at T1 that Mary will go to the baseball game at T3 is similar in certain respects to the fact (about Monday) that Jack goes to the store prior to the sun’s rising on Wednesday. Although they are both soft facts about the times in question, they are nevertheless plausibly taken to be *fixed* at subsequent times in virtue of features of their internal structure.



One might distinguish two ways of dividing up facts: into “smaller” facts and into individuals and properties (and perhaps times). On the first approach, the components of a fact are also facts; the conjunction of the components comprises the “larger” fact. On the second approach, the components of a fact are an individual (or set of individuals) and a property (or set of properties); the individual’s having the property (perhaps at a time) comprises the fact.

Let us say that an agent can at some time T falsify a fact F insofar as he can at T so act that F would not have been a fact. And let us say that an agent can at some time T affect a property insofar as he can at T so act that some individual (who perhaps in fact has the property) would not have (or have had) the property.

With the first method of division, there is the possibility of generating “hard-core soft facts.” These are soft facts with component facts (of a certain sort) which are hard. With the second method of division, we have the possibility of generating “hard-type soft facts.” These are soft facts with component properties (of a certain sort) which are hard properties. Parallel to the distinction between hard and soft facts is a distinction between hard (temporally non-relational) and soft (temporally relational) properties. So, whereas *Judy sits at T1* is a hard fact about T1, *Judy sits at T1 prior to having lunch at T2* is a soft fact about T1. And whereas the property, sitting, is a hard property relative to T1, the property, sitting prior to having lunch at T2, is a soft property relative to T1.

## II

I believe that there are powerful intuitive considerations in favor of taking the property, believing that P, to be a hard property relative to the time at which the belief is held.<sup>4</sup> Further, I have suggested a way of characterizing hard properties which has been criticized insightfully in a number of places by David Widerker.<sup>5</sup> I shall lay out my original suggestion and his criticism: then I shall offer a proposal which avoids the difficulties adduced by Widerker. This is an important project insofar as one wishes to protect and defend the claim that God’s belief is a *special* sort of soft fact, a sort of soft fact with a distinctive internal structure.

My suggestion was essentially this. A soft property, relative to a time T, is a property such that if *anything* were to have that property at T, it would necessarily follow that some temporally non-relational (hard) fact obtains after T, on any intuitively plausible account of temporally non-relational (hard) facts. A hard property relative to T is a property which is not soft relative to T.

To motivate this suggestion, consider the property, reading prior to going to the baseball game at T2. Anyone’s having this property at T1 entails that

she goes to the game at T2; thus, the property in question is deemed a soft property relative to T1. Similar considerations apply to such properties as, knowing that the sun will rise at T2, correctly believing that the Giants will lose the game at T2, etc. On this approach, a property such as believing that Mary will go to the game at T2 is a *hard* property relative to T1: it is *not* the case that if *anyone* were to have this property at T1, it would necessarily follow that some hard fact would obtain at a time after T1. And this is so, even if *God believes at T1 that Mary will go to the game at T2* is a *soft fact* about T1. Here, we have combined a hard property with a special sort of individual to get a soft fact about T1: this phenomenon constitutes a kind of “metaphysical alchemy.”

Consider now Widerker’s criticism, which begins with a consideration of the fact

(Y1) The sentence ‘Jack will pull the trigger at T10’ is true at T0:

On Fischer’s analysis, (Y1) may be viewed as a fact about T0, whose constitutive elements are: the sentence “Jack will pull the trigger at T10”, the property of being true, and the time T0. But now notice that on his account, the property of being true is a hard property, relative to T0. Clearly, it is not the case that if *anything* were to have that property at T0, it would necessarily follow that some [temporally non-relational] fact obtains after T0. (For example, if Jack raises his arm at T0, then ‘Jack raises his arm at T0’ has the property of being true at T0. But this does not entail that some [temporally non-relational] fact obtains at some time after T0.) Hence, (Y1) would have to be treated by Fischer as a hard-type soft fact about T0, which is counterintuitive.<sup>6</sup>

In “Troubles with Ockhamism,” Widerker says:

...let us assume that (14) Smith correctly believes at T1 that it is not the case that Jack will sign the contract at T4. Suppose further that Jack has it within his power at T2 to sign the contract at T4, but for some reason decides not to do so. Intuitively, (14) is a soft fact about the past (relative to T2) of the rather soft sort. If Jack had decided to sign the contract at T4, he could have brought about the nonobtaining of (14). But now let us examine the constitutive property of (14), the property of correctly believing that it is not the case that Jack signs the contract at T4. On Fischer’s account, this property is a hard property, relative to T1. Clearly, it is not the case that, if anything were to have that property at T1, it would necessarily follow that some [temporally non-relational] fact obtains at a time later than T1. For example, we can conceive of a possible world in which the said property is exemplified by Smith at T1, but in which there are no times later than T1. In such a world, (14) would be true, although no [temporally non-relational] state of affairs would obtain in it at times later than T1. Consequently, Fischer would have to treat (14) as a hard-type soft fact about T1, which is counterintuitive.<sup>7</sup>

Widerker goes on to say:

A further problem for Fischer’s account is posed by properties, such as...cor-

rectly believing that all ravens are white or Jack will sign the contract at T3, etc. These properties, too, would have to be treated by Fischer as hard properties, relative to T1. But their exemplification by an object at T1 may easily yield soft fact of the standard (soft) type, i.e.,

(16) Smith correctly believes at T1 that all ravens are white or Jack will sign the contract at T3.<sup>8</sup>

Finally, Widerker says:

A further indication that Fischer's account of a hard property is incomplete is provided by the property

P4: being immersed in water and being soluble in water.

This property, which consists of two hard properties—the property of being immersed in water, and the dispositional property of being soluble in water—seems intuitively a hard property, relative to the pertinent time. But on Fischer's account, it would count as a soft property. Keeping in mind that by 'hard property' Fischer understands a temporally genuine property, and assuming that he wants his account of the notion of a temporally genuine property to be more than merely a *stipulative* definition, Fischer owes us an explanation of how is it that by combining two temporally genuine properties we get a temporally non-genuine property. Note that, being a conjunction of two temporally genuine (hard) properties, P4 differs crucially from all of Fischer's examples of soft properties, each of which is either a simple soft property itself, or contains a soft property as a part. Also, unlike Fischer's examples of soft properties, P4, when exemplified by an object at a time T, yields a fact about T that can be analyzed as consisting of two *hard* facts about T.<sup>9</sup>

### III

Let me now suggest a more refined account which, I hope, can avoid the problems adduced by Widerker. Before the account is presented, I need to turn back to the phenomenon of metaphysical alchemy noted above. In some cases, one can get a soft fact by combining a hard property with a special sort of individual. Above, I claimed that this phenomenon is present in cases of God's beliefs: although believing that so-and-so is a hard property, God's possessing it is a soft fact (*in virtue of God's essential omniscience*). In cases of metaphysical alchemy of this sort, features of an individual which intuitively constitute hard properties do not combine with the pertinent individual to form hard facts—yet these features are undeniably relevant to a determination of the individual's hard properties. This suggests that, in ascertaining the hard properties, we need to focus on what is entailed by the hard facts about non-essentially omniscient individuals.

More specifically, let "C" be the complete conjunction of temporally non-relational, i.e., hard facts about a given time T. I shall say that a property P

is a hard property relative to T just in case (i) some individual has P at T, and (ii) for any non-essentially omniscient individual I existing at T, either C entails that I has P or C entails that I does not have P.<sup>10</sup>

It is important to see that I am not attempting in this paper to give a fully *reductive* analysis of the notion of a hard property. Rather, I am assuming either some adequate account of hard *facts* or at least clear intuitions about clear cases of hard facts. I then construct an account of hard properties which makes use of these other notions. Hence, I have a rather circumscribed project in this paper. Note also that just as a state of affairs must *obtain* (or alternatively the proposition in question must be *true*) for it to be a candidate for hard facthood, some individual must have the property at the relevant time in order for it to be a candidate for being a hard property relative to that time.

Now let us apply the new account of hard properties to the examples to which Widerker adverts. Remember the fact,

(Y1) The sentence 'Jack will pull the trigger at T10' is *true* at T0.

Widerker points out that "is true" turns out to be a hard property on my original suggestion, and so (Y1) will implausibly be deemed a hard-type soft fact about T10.<sup>11</sup> But on the new account, "is true" is not a hard property. Consider the sentence, 'Jack will pull the trigger at T10.' It is *not* the case that the complete conjunction C of hard facts about T0 entails that this sentence is true. And it is *not* the case that this conjunction C entails that this sentence is false. Remember that the new account of hard properties says that P is a hard property relative to T just in case for any non-essentially omniscient individual I either the complete conjunction C of hard facts about T entails that I has P or it entails that I does not have P. Thus, on the new account, "is true" need not be deemed a hard property relative to T0.

Also, consider the fact that Smith correctly believes at T1 that it is not the case that Jack will sign the contract at T4. Widerker notes that on my original account, the property, correctly believing that it is not the case that Jack will sign the contract at T4, must be considered a hard property relative to T1. This is because the fact about Smith's belief is (according to Widerker) compatible with time's stopping right after T1; if this is correct, then it is not the case that if anything were to have the property in question at T1, it would necessarily follow that some temporally non-relational state of affairs would obtain after T1. But note that the new account of hard properties implies the correct result, *i.e.*, that the property, correctly believing that it is not the case that Jack will sign the contract at T4, is a soft property relative to T1. This is because the complete conjunction C of hard facts about the world at T1 neither entails that Smith has this property at T1 nor that Smith does not have this property at T1.

Widerker's next criticism consists in pointing out that on my original sug-

gestion certain disjunctive belief properties which are intuitively soft properties must be considered hard.<sup>12</sup> Widerker's example is that of correctly believing at T1 that all ravens are white or Jack will sign the contract at T3. On my original account, this property would be a soft property if any individual's possessing it at T1 would *entail* that some hard fact obtains after T1. But presumably there can be worlds in which all ravens are white and in which time ends right after T1. Thus, on my account, the property in question would have to be considered a hard fact.

Widerker's example here involves a belief whose first conjunct is false. In "Two Forms of Fatalism" he gives a similar example, saying:

A further problem for Fischer's account is posed by properties such as: ...correctly believing that either Smith weighs 50 kg on January 1, or Jack will sign the contract on January 3 (where the first disjunct is false). These properties turn out, on his definition, to be hard properties relative to, say, January 1. But their exemplification by some individual on January 1 may easily yield soft facts of the standard type.<sup>13</sup>

But it seems to me that the problem also emerges if the first disjunct is *true*. Consider the property, correctly believing at T1 that either all ravens are black or Jack will sign the contract at T3. On my original account this property must be considered a hard property relative to T1, because an individual (who believes that all ravens are black) can have this property compatibly with the world's ending right after T1. Fortunately, on the new account, both sorts of disjunctive belief properties—the one with a false first disjunct and the one with a true first disjunct—are considered soft properties relative to T1.

Widerker's final criticism consists in pointing out that certain conjunctive properties which are intuitively hard must be considered soft on my original account. Indeed, these examples involve another form of alchemy, because when one combines two elements each of which is a hard property, one gets a soft property. Widerker's example is a property such as, being immersed in water at T1 and being soluble at T1. Widerker claims, "Fischer owes us an explanation of how is it that by combining two temporally genuine properties we get a temporally nongenuine property."<sup>14</sup> Whence the metaphysical alchemy? How do we get softness by combining hard conjuncts?

Presumably, Widerker assumes that being soluble in water entails that if the object is placed in water at T1, it will dissolve at some later time. Thus, anything's having the conjunctive property at T1 will entail that an object dissolves in water at some later time. If Widerker's assumption were true, then this would constitute a counterexample to my original suggestion. But I do not think the putative entailment in the assumption really obtains. For example, it is possible (in some broad sense) that a magician place a hard shell around the object immediately after it is placed in water; thus, although

it is soluble (in virtue of its intrinsic composition), it is not the case that it would dissolve at some later time, if it were placed in water at T1.<sup>15</sup> (Also, it is possible in some broad sense that the water freeze immediately after the object is placed in water; again, if this were to happen, it would not be the case that if the object were placed in water at T1, it would dissolve at some later time.) Thus, it is *not* the case that anything's having the relevant conjunctive property at T1 would *entail* that an object dissolves in water at some later time. Hence, the example is not a counterexample to my original suggestion.

In any case, the new account of hard properties does not generate alchemy of the sort described by Widerker. Consider the example of the property of being immersed in water at T1 and being soluble in water. The new account of hard properties implies that the conjunctive property is hard: the complete conjunction C of hard facts about T will either entail that I has this property or it will entail that I does not have this property, for any suitable I. (I assume here that facts about an object's intrinsic structure—perhaps together with the laws of nature—entail whether or not it is soluble in water.)

#### IV

In this paper I have sharpened the account of hard properties. I have thus attempted further to support the claim that God's beliefs are hard-type soft facts. The underlying rationale of the project is to bring out more crisply the gut-level inchoate feeling that there is an important difference between standard sorts of soft facts and God's beliefs. God's beliefs are distinctive; whereas standard soft facts are soft-type soft facts, God's beliefs are, if soft at all, hard-type soft facts. And this distinctive internal structure may be pertinent to the fixity characteristics of facts about God's beliefs.

It is very important to recognize that not all soft facts are relevantly similar. Consider, for example, two arguments of Alvin Plantinga.<sup>16</sup> First, Plantinga argues that facts about God's beliefs are similar to standard soft facts insofar as they entail intuitively hard facts about subsequent times. Thus, for example, both *It is true at T1 that Mary will go to the game at T2* and *God believes at T1 that Mary will go the game at T2* entail that Mary goes to the game at T2; the facts are *in this respect* similar. But pointing to this similarity is not sufficient to vindicate the claim that the two facts are *relevantly similar*, *i.e.*, similar with regard to *all* their fixity characteristics. Such characteristics may in part be a function of a fact's internal structure, and the fact about God's belief may have a crucial component which is *hard*.

Second, consider Plantinga's "equivalence argument." Plantinga points out that, on the assumption that God exists necessarily, the facts, *God believes at T1 that Mary goes to the game at T2* and *Mary goes to the game at T2* are necessarily equivalent. On certain approaches to fact individuation, necessar-

ily equivalent facts would be identical. But in any case, since *Mary goes to the game at T2* is clearly not a hard fact about T1, and *Mary goes to the game at T2* is necessarily equivalent to *God believes at T1 that Mary goes to the game at T2*, it is plausible to conclude that *God believes at T1 that Mary goes to the game at T2* is not a hard fact about T1.

We can grant the conclusion of Plantinga's equivalence argument. But again we must point out that it does not entail that the two facts are *relevantly similar*. Any fact necessarily equivalent to a soft fact may be a soft fact—but it remains open that it be a hard-type soft fact. Thus, again, Plantinga's argument is not sufficient to vindicate Ockhamism.

There are indeed troubles with Ockhamism—the cushy, comfortable analogue of soft determinism. It does not *suffice* to vindicate Ockhamism that God's beliefs are soft facts about the times at which they are held; there is a structure and articulation to these facts which cannot be ignored. The intractable hard elements of God's beliefs just won't go away. These irrefragable residual elements are analogues in a broad sense of Austin's frog staring up from the bottom of the mug. There are troubles in paradise.

Once upon a time—many years ago—philosophers believed in hard facts and soft facts. And this was a good distinction, one which revealed something. But whereas it revealed something, it also concealed something. More precisely, an excessive preoccupation with the distinction and with classifying facts as hard or soft concealed the reticulate inner complexity of soft facts.

*University of California, Riverside*

## NOTES

1. For a classic contemporary development of the incompatibilist's argument, see: Nelson Pike, "Divine Omniscience and Voluntary Action," *Philosophical Review*, LXXIV (1965), pp. 27-46.

2. There is a good discussion of the history of the incompatibilist's argument and various traditional responses to it in: Alvin Plantinga, "On Ockham's Way Out," *Faith and Philosophy* III (1986), pp. 235-69. There is a selection of papers about Ockhamism (including Plantinga's) in: John Martin Fischer (ed.), *God, Foreknowledge, and Freedom* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989).

3. John Martin Fischer, "Ockhamism," *Philosophical Review* XCV (1985), pp. 69-79; and "Hard-Type Soft Facts," *Philosophical Review* XCV (1986), pp. 591-601.

4. See: Fischer, "Hard-Type Soft Facts."

5. David Widerker, "Two Forms of Fatalism," in Fischer, ed., pp. 97-110; and "Troubles with Ockhamism," *Journal of Philosophy* LXXXVII, (1990), pp. 462-80.

6. Widerker, "Two Forms of Fatalism," pp. 109-10.

7. Widerker, "Troubles with Ockhamism."

8. *Ibid.*

9. *Ibid.*

10. Of course, this account must be distinguished from the obviously *unhelpful* account which contains the following proposition: for any (suitable) individual I, C entails that I has or does not have P. Also, by “a non-essentially omniscient individual,” I simply mean an individual who is not essentially omniscient.

11. Widerker here appears to be assuming that sentence-types are individuals which exist at times. I shall not dispute this point here.

12. Disjunctive belief properties involve believed disjunctions rather than disjunctions of beliefs.

13. Widerker, “Two Forms of Fatalism,” p. 110.

14. Widerker, “Troubles with Ockhamism,” p. 480.

15. For a discussion of this sort of example, see Alvin Goldman, *A Theory of Human Action* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1970), pp. 199-200.

16. Both arguments are developed in: Plantinga, “On Ockham’s Way Out.”