Ockham’s Solution to the Problem of Freedom vs. Foreknowledge

1. The Problem: Let us return one more time to the problem of human freedom and divine foreknowledge. Imagine that God foreknows that Peter will be saved (Ockham’s example). Let’s make it even simpler. Imagine He foreknows today that Peter will repent on Friday. Does Peter freely repent? The argument that he does not looks like this:

1. (Today it is true that) God foreknows that Peter will repent (say, on Friday).
2. Peter repents freely if and only if it is also possible for him to not repent (i.e., if his repenting is contingent).
3. But, if God foreknows that Peter will repent, then Peter must repent (i.e., it is necessary rather than contingent; it is not possible for Peter to not repent).

Reason: If God knows that Peter will repent, then it is true that Peter will repent. (One cannot know something false.) Furthermore, God knows this eternally, and He is immutable, so this truth is unchangeable. Even worse, if somehow Peter brought about the impossible and did fail to repent, then God would have been deceived (i.e., He would have “known” something false). But, God is infallible.

4. Therefore, Peter does not repent by his own will.

The problem stems from the views that God knows things eternally (so He’s known about the future for all time), He is immutable (so His knowledge doesn’t change), and infallibly omniscient (so He is never wrong). What room is therefore human freedom?

2. Ockham’s Solution: Ockham proposes an ingenious solution—one that is largely still accepted as correct by theist philosophers today (see, e.g., Alvin Plantinga).

His solution hinges on getting the proper understanding of what sort of necessity is involved in God’s foreknowledge. Premise 3 says that Peter MUST repent. It seems like there’s some necessity there. [In On Free Choice of the Will, 3.6, Augustine stated it this way: “It is necessary that whatever he [the Creator] foreknows will happen.”] But, how should we understand this necessity?

As Ockham points out, “I maintain that ‘predestination is necessary’ can be understood in two different ways.” Those two ways are as follows:

(a) Necessarily, if God knows <P>, then <P> is true.
(b) If God knows <P>, then, necessarily, <P> is true.
These may seem like the same claim, but they are in fact very different. To understand why, it may help to read ‘necessarily’ as ‘it is impossible for things to be otherwise than the following’. So, for instance, the above would read:

(a) It is impossible for things to be otherwise than the following: If God knows <P>, then <P> is true.

(b) If God knows <P>, then, it is impossible for things to be otherwise than the following: <P> is true.

Claim (a) is just a claim about what is entailed by knowledge: Namely, if someone knows something, then it is true—after all, it is impossible to know something false! But, claim (b) is much stronger. It claims that, if God knows something, then what He knows is a NECESSARY truth—i.e., something that could not possibly have been false.

It is only necessity of type (b) that poses a problem for human free will. So, Ockham argues that we should understand the necessity to be only of (the innocuous) type (a).

Further Clarification: To further understand this difference, consider these two claims:

(a) Necessarily, if <You are a bachelor> is true, then <You are single> is true.

(b) If <You are a bachelor> is true, then, necessarily, <You are single> is true.

(a) says something so trivial it is almost a tautology. It merely says that it is impossible for it to be true that you are a bachelor, without it also being true that you are single. The former just entails the latter. But, (b) says something much stronger—something that even seems clearly false. It says that, if it is true that <You are a bachelor>, then it is IMPOSSIBLE for you to ever be anything but single! (i.e., you are necessarily a bachelor!)

One More: To illustrate the difference in the context of knowledge, consider these:

(a) Necessarily, if I know that <Obama exists>, then <Obama exists> is true.

(b) If I know that <Obama exists>, then, necessarily, <Obama exists> is true.

(a) just follows from the definition of what it is to know something. But, (b) says that, because I know that <Obama exists> is true, it follows that <Obama exists> is a NECESSARY TRUTH. In other words, it is IMPOSSIBLE for Obama to not have existed, and impossible for him to cease to exist. But, that is surely false. Obama is not a necessary being; he is contingent (i.e., it is possible that he fails to exist). For instance, his parents might never have met, and he might never have been born; and one day he will die; etc.
Applied to Divine Foreknowledge: So, then, let’s return to Peter’s repenting:

(a) **It is impossible for things to be otherwise than the following:** If God knows that Peter will repent on Friday, then Peter will in fact repent on Friday. (TRUE)

(b) If God knows that Peter will repent on Friday, then **it is impossible for things to be otherwise than the following:** Peter repents on Friday. (FALSE)

3. **How It Works:** Okay, but how in the heck is claim (b) false? How does that work?? It may still seem like freedom is just the ability to deceive God. For instance, Ockham seems to agree with all of the following premises:

1. God foreknows that <Peter repents on Friday>.
2. Therefore, Peter will in fact repent on Friday.

So far so good. Yet, Ockham has argued for a third claim:

3. Yet, (since it is a free act) Peter’s act of repentance is contingent. Therefore, it is also within Peter’s power to NOT repent on Friday.

But, these seem to entail the conclusion:

4. Therefore, it is within Peter’s power to make God have been mistaken (i.e., God “foreknew” something that turned out to be false, so that God had a false belief!).

But, Ockham does not think that (4) follows from (1) – (3). The conclusion (4) smuggles in the assumption that there is some possible scenario where (1) is true at the same time as <Peter does NOT repent on Friday> is also true. But, that’s not the case.

Reason: In the possible scenario where Peter does NOT repent on Friday, God does NOT have the belief described in (1). Rather, in that scenario, God instead foreknows that <Peter will NOT repent on Friday>. Consider an example:

Imagine that I am watching Peter as he holds up a single fruit, selected from a whole bunch of fruits. Peter chooses to hold up an apple. I form the belief, <Peter is holding an apple>. Still, it’s true that he COULD HAVE held up a banana instead, right?

The objection seems to be: “A-ha! Then you’re admitting that Peter could deceived you. Because you’ve just admitted that it’s possible for you to believe that Peter is holding an apple while he is actually holding a banana!”

How would you reply? Likely: “No, you’re confused. Because if Peter had done THAT, then I would have formed a DIFFERENT belief—namely, <Peter is holding a banana>.”
This is all that Ockham is saying. If Peter will freely repent, then God always and forever believes that Peter will repent. However, if Peter will freely refrain from repenting, then God always and forever believes that Peter will not repent. Plain and simple. Ockham writes,

“although by hypothesis the proposition is true and will have been true, it is nevertheless possible that it is not true and that it will never have been absolutely true.” And elsewhere, “For example, ‘God knows that this person will be saved’ is true and yet it is possible that He will never have known that this person will be saved. And so that proposition is ... not necessary but contingent.”

Basically, by freely choosing A rather than B, we make it the case that God always and forever knew that we would do A rather than B. But, if we were to choose B rather than A, then we make it the case that God always and forever knew that we would do B rather than A. Long story short: God’s knowledge of what is true about the future does not necessitate our future choices. Rather, it’s the other way around! Our free choices and actions in the future necessitate what God knows all along to be true.