In Defense of Prior's 'Peircean' Tense Logic

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ABSTRACT: In his writings, Arthur Prior distinguishes between 'Ockhamist' and 'Peircean' systems of tense logic and endorses the latter as a response to the problem of foreknowledge (or foretruth) and future contingents.[1] The difference between the two turns primarily on the thesis, which Ockhamists accept and Peirceans reject, that "for all *p*, if (it is the case that) *p* then it has always been the case that it would be the case that *p*."[2] Prior, however, largely contents himself with articulating the tense-logical differences between the two positions and only offers a brief and underdeveloped argument on behalf of the Peircean over against the Ockhamist.[3]

My goals in this paper are threefold. First is to refine the thesis in question. For one thing, as it stands, the thesis rules out the possibility of a beginning of time. Since many Ockhamists do want to endorse that possibility, Prior's formulation fails to capture the Ockhamist position with sufficient precision. Additionally, I argue that the Peircean/Ockhamist distinction is best understood as a disagreement about whether, for philosophical purposes, the future-tense operator ought to be understood as carrying causal force (Peirce) or not (Ockham).

Second, I undertake to refine and defend Prior's anti-Ockhamist argument. Specifically, I identify two related problems for Ockhamism: (1) the *assertion problem*, and (2) the *grounding problem*. With respect to (1), I argue that, in colloquial speech, genuine assertions about the future invariably carry causal force. Consequently, the Ockhamist's non-causal construal of the future-tense operator does not do a good job of capturing the semantics of ordinary tensed discourse. With respect to (2), I press a truthmaker-style objection against A-theoretical versions of Ockhamism and argue that they lack the ontological resources to properly ground truths about the future. In contrast the Peircean, I argue, is immune to both objections.

Third and finally, I respond to a couple Ockhamist counterarguments: (1) that the Peircean cannot make sense of retroactive ascriptions of truth to contingent predictions,[4] (2) that the Peircean must either endorse fatalism or deny bivalence.[5]

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[1] Prior explicitly makes the distinction in at least two places: "The Formalities of Omniscience" in *Papers on Time and Tense* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2003), pp. 39-58; and "Time and Determinism" in *Past, Present and Future* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), pp. 113-36.
[2] Prior, "The Formalities of Omniscience", p. 44.
[3] Prior, "The Formalities of Omniscience", p. 49.
[4] For example, Alfred J. Fredosso, "Introduction" to Luis de Molina, *On Divine Foreknowledge: Part IV of the Concordia*, tr. Alfred J. Fredosso (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1988), pp. 71-72. See also Nuel Belnap, Michael Perloff, and Ming Xu make a similar charge in *Facing the Future* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2001), p. 159.
[5] For example, William Lane Craig, *Divine Foreknowledge and Human Freedom* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1991), ch. 2.