A Note on Zero-Knowledge for **NP** and One-Way Functions

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Abstract

We present a simple alternative exposition of the the recent result of Hirahara and Nanashima (STOC'24) showing that one-way functions exist if (1) every language in **NP** has a zero-knowledge proof/argument (i.e., **NP** $\subseteq$ **ZKA**) and (2) **ZKA** contains non-trivial languages (i.e., **ZKA** $\not\subseteq$ **ioP/poly**). Our presentation does not rely on meta-complexity and we hope it may be useful for didactic purposes. We also remark that the same result hold for (imperfect) iO for 3CNF, or Witness Encryption for **NP**.

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1 Introduction

Zero-knowledge ($\mathcal{ZK}$) proofs, introduced by Goldwasser, Micali and Rackoff [GMR89] are paradoxical constructs that enables a Prover to convince a Verfier that some instance x belongs to a language L without revealing any additional information. In the case where the soundness condition only holds against polynomial-size attacker, the proof systems is instead referred to as a *zero-knowledge argument* [BCC88]; let **ZKA** denote the class of languages having $\mathcal{ZK}$ arguments. While classic results in the early 1990's established that, assuming the existence of *one-way functions (OWFs)*, every language in **NP** has a $\mathcal{ZK}$ proof [GMW91; HILL99; Nao91], it remains an open problem whether the existence of *non-trivial* $\mathcal{ZK}$ proofs/arguments also imply the existence of OWFs.

Seminal results by Ostrovsky [Ost91], and Ostrovsky and Wigderson (OW) [OW93] from the 1990's, however, show that non-trivial $\mathcal{ZK}$ "almost" implies OWFs. In particular, they show that if $\mathbf{ZKA} \not\subseteq \mathbf{ioP/poly}$, then a relaxation of OWFs, referred to as a *auxiliary-input* OWF (ai-OWF) exist.[1] Additionally OW shows that if **ZKA** contains a language that is *average-case hard*, then (standard) OWFs exist.[2]

Thus, the only "gap" is between ai-OWFs and (standard) OWFs, or between worst-case and average-case hardness for a language in **ZKA**. A recent elegant paper by Hirahara and Nanashima (HN) [HN24] closes this gap under the assumption that all of **NP** (or even just a specific meta-complexity language) has zero-knowledge arguments (i.e., $\mathbf{NP} \subseteq \mathbf{ZKA}$). In other words, they show:

Theorem 1.1 (Main)**.** *Assume that* $\mathbf{NP} \subseteq \mathbf{ZKA}$*, and that* $\mathbf{ZKA} \not\subseteq \mathbf{ioP/poly}$*. Then one-way functions exist.*

In this note, we provide a somewhat alternative presentation of the proof of the HN result. The proof elements are very similar, but our exposition is more direct and we dispense of the use of meta-complexity. As such, we hope that their results becomes easier to appreciate (without any background on meta-complexity).

Proof Overview The proof proceeds in two steps:

1. ***Errorless* average-case hardness of ZKA implies OWFs.** As mentioned, OW already showed that average-case hardness of **ZKA** implies OWFs. We observe (following the approach in [HN24]) that essentially a direct combination of a characterization of Vadhan [Vad06] together with the results of Ostrovsky [Ost91] yields the stronger statement that *errorless*[3] average-case hardness suffices (i.e., that $\mathbf{ZKA} \not\subseteq \mathbf{ioAvgBPP/poly}$).[4] In essence, the reason why errorless average-case hardness suffices is that given a statement x, the reduction provided in these earlier works either correctly decides x, or fails to invert some ai-OWF candidate f_x; but since the latter event is checkable, the reduction can easily be made errorless.

[1] Roughly speaking, an ai-OWF is family of functions f_i such that no polynomial-size attacker A can invert *every* function in the family. That is, there exists some i on which A fails to invert f_i.

[2] In essence, when just assuming worst-case hardness of some language in **ZKA**, the index i is selected as an instance in the language on which the attacker will fail to decide the language, whereas in the case of average-case hardness, the index can be efficiently sampled so we get a standard OWF.

[3] That is, we consider hardness against algorithms that either give the right answer or $\perp$, and that only output $\perp$ with small probability.

[4] Coincidentally, OV actually stated their result assuming that $\mathbf{ZKA} \not\subseteq \mathbf{ioAvgBPP/poly}$, but while the notation *Avg* typically denotes errorless average-case hardness in the literature, they defined it as two-sided error average-case hardness, so this is a strict strengthening of their result.

2. **Auxiliary-input OWFs imply average-case hardness of NP.** We observe that the PRG construction of HILL [HILL99] yields an average-case hardness language in **NP** even when instantiated with an ai-OWF: The language consists of all strings in the range of the PRG, and average-case hardness holds over the uniform distribution. The argument (which can be traced back to [Hir18], and made explicit for general PRGs in [LP21b]), is simple: an errorless algorithm for the uniform distribution needs to output 1 with high probability when given a uniform sample (since with high probability those strings are not in the range of the PRG), and output either 0 or $\perp$ when given a sample in the range of the PRG, so simply interpret $\perp$ as a 0 and we have a PRG distinguisher that works with high probability, which using the HILL reduction can be turned into an inverter for the (ai)-OWFs.[5]

So, by OW, non-trivial $\mathcal{ZK}$ implies ai-OWF, which by step (2), and the assumption that $\mathbf{NP} \subseteq \mathbf{ZKA}$ implies that $\mathbf{ZKA} \not\subseteq \mathbf{ioAvgBPP/poly}$ which by step (1) implies OWFs. (Note that this results also hold just for honest-verifier zero-knowledge; in any case, by [OV07], a language has zero-knowledge argument if and only if it has honest-verifier zero-knowledge argument.)

1.1 Corollaries to iO and WE

We note an interesting new corollary of Theorem 1.1 (i.e., the main result of [HN24]) with respect to *indistinguishability obfuscation (iO)* [Bar+12] and *witness encryption for* **NP** *(WE)* [GGSW13]. [Kom+14] showed that (imperfect) iO for polynomial-size circuits and the assumption that **NP** is worst-case hard yield the existence of one-way functions. They further showed that iO for just the class of 3CNF formulas, or even WE for **NP** (which is implied by iO for 3CNFs) together with *average-case harness* of **NP** yield one-way functions, but left open the problem of whether worst-case hardness of **NP** suffices. We observe that Theorem 1.1 can be used to solve this (in the non-uniform setting).

In particular, [Kom+14] show that these primitives can be used to construct statistical zero-knowledge arguments for **NP** (see Theorem 5.2 and the following remark in [Kom+14]); next, by relying on Theorem 1.1, we can conclude the existence of one-way functions assuming just (non-uniform) worst-case hardness of **NP**.[6]

Corollary 1.2. *Assume that* $\mathbf{NP} \not\subseteq \mathbf{ioP/poly}$*. If there exists an (imperfect) iO for 3CNF formulas, or WE for* **NP***, then one-way functions exist.*

In fact, it suffices to assume WE for MCSP (using [HN24]) or $\mathrm{MK^tP}$ (by Corollary A.3.)

2 Preliminaries and Definitions

Let **ZKA** denote set of languages having zero-knowledge arguments [GMR89; BCC88], and let **SZKP** denote the set of languages having statistical zero-knowledge proofs (see e.g., [SV97]). We proceed to defining the notion of errorless average-case hardness.

[5] In fact, essentially the same argument shows errorless average-case hardness of the *Minimum time-bounded Kolmogorov complexity problem* [Ko86], see Appendix A. We note that HN used a similar but more complicated argument to show average-case hardness of the Minimum Circuit Size problem [KC00] relying on the construction of a PRF [GGM84] from OWFs.

[6] In contrast, whereas [Kom+14] required average-case hardness, their result also applied in the uniform setting.

Definition 2.1 (ioAvgBPP/poly). *A pair $(\mathcal{L}, \mathcal{D})$ of a language $\mathcal{L}$ and a samplable distribution $\mathcal{D} = \{\mathcal{D}_n\}_{n\in\mathbb{N}}$ is in* **ioAvgBPP/poly** *if there exists a non-uniform PPT A such that the following holds for infinitely many $n \in \mathbb{N}$:*

- *For every $x \in \mathsf{Supp}(\mathcal{D}_n)$, $\Pr[A(x) \in \{\bot, \mathcal{L}(x)\}] \geq 0.9$*
- $\Pr_{x\leftarrow\mathcal{D}_n}[A(x) = \bot] \leq 1/4$.

We recall that notion of an ai-OWF:

Definition 2.2 (ai-OWF)**.** *A function family $\left\{f_a \colon \{0,1\}^{m(n)} \to \{0,1\}^{m(n)}\right\}_{a\in\{0,1\}^n}$ is an* auxiliary-input one-way function (ai-OWF) *if for every non-uniform* PPT $\mathcal{A}$ *there exists a negligible function μ such that for every $n \in \mathbb{N}$, there exists some $a \in \{0,1\}^n$ such that*

$$\Pr_{x\leftarrow\{0,1\}^{m(n)}}\left[\mathcal{A}(a, f_a(x)) \in f_a^{-1}(f_a(x))\right] \leq \mu(n) \tag{1}$$

If a is simply 0^n, we refer to the family as simply a one-way function (OWF)*. We say that $\{f_a\}$ is* almost-everywhere hard *on a set $\mathcal{I} \subset \{0,1\}^*$ if Equation (1) holds for every $a \in \mathcal{I} \cap \{0,1\}^n$.*

Finally, let us recall the classic result by Ostrovksy and Wigderson [OW93]:

Theorem 2.3 ($\mathcal{ZK}$ to ai-OWF, [OW93])**.** *Assume that* $\mathbf{ZKA} \not\subseteq \mathbf{ioP/poly}$*. Then ai-OWF exists.*

3 Proof of Main Theorem

3.1 Step 1: ZKA $\not\subseteq$ ioAvgBPP/poly $\Rightarrow$ OWFs

Recall that OV showed that *two-sided* error average-case hardness of **ZKA** implies OWF; we here show the same by starting with just *errorless* average-case hardness of **ZKA**.[7]

Lemma 3.1 (Errorless Avg-Hardness of $\mathcal{ZK}$ to OWFs)**.** *Assume that there exists a language $\mathcal{L} \in \mathbf{ZKA}$ and samplable distribution $\mathcal{D}$ such that $(\mathcal{L}, \mathcal{D}) \notin \mathbf{ioAvgBPP/poly}$. Then OWFs exist.*

Towards proving this, we will rely on the following characterization of **ZKA** of Vadhan [Vad06].

Definition 3.2 (SZK/OWF [Vad06])**.** *A promise problem $\Pi = (\Pi_{\mathcal{Y}}, \Pi_{\mathcal{N}})$ satisfies the SZKP/OWF Condition if there is $\mathcal{I} \subseteq \Pi_{\mathcal{Y}} \cup \Pi_{\mathcal{N}}$ such that:*

- *The promise problem $(\Pi_{\mathcal{Y}} \setminus \mathcal{I}, \Pi_{\mathcal{N}} \setminus \mathcal{I})$ is in* **SZKP***.*
- *There exists an auxiliary-input one-way function which is almost everywhere hard on $\mathcal{I}$.*

Theorem 3.3 ([OV07])**.** *If $(\mathcal{Y}, \mathcal{N}) \in \mathbf{ZKA}$ then $(\mathcal{Y}, \mathcal{N})$ satisfies the SZKP/OWF Condition.*

We will also rely on the following version of the results by Ostrovsky (as explicitly stated in [Vad06].)

Theorem 3.4 ([Ost91] (c.f. [Vad06, Theorem 7.5]))**.** *Let $\Pi = (\Pi_{\mathcal{Y}}, \Pi_{\mathcal{N}}) \in \mathbf{SZKP}$. Then there exists a function family $\{f_x\}_{x\in\{0,1\}^*}$ and an oracle-aided PPT R, such that for every $x \in \Pi_{\mathcal{Y}} \cup \Pi_{\mathcal{N}}$ and any algorithm A that inverts f_x with probability at least 0.01, $\Pr\left[R^A(x) = \Pi(x)\right] \geq 0.99$.*

[7] This result also easily follows from two theorem statements in [HN24], but was not explicit stated as far as we can tell.

We now turn to the proof of Lemma 3.1.

Proof of Lemma 3.1. Let $(\Pi = (\mathcal{L}, \overline{\mathcal{L}}), \mathcal{D}) \in (\mathbf{ZKA}) \setminus (\mathbf{ioAvgBPP/poly})$. Let $\mathcal{I}$ and $\{h_x\}_{x\in\{0,1\}^*}$ be the set and the auxiliary-input one-way function promised by Theorem 3.3 and the SZK/OWF condition for Π. Let $\{g_x\}_{x\in\{0,1\}*}$ and R be the auxiliary-input one-way function and reduction promised by Theorem 3.4 for $\Pi' = (\Pi_{\mathcal{Y}} \setminus \mathcal{I}, \Pi_{\mathcal{N}} \setminus \mathcal{I})$.

Let $f(r, y_1, y_2) = \mathcal{D}(r)||h_{\mathcal{D}(r)}(y_1)||g_{\mathcal{D}(r)}(y_2)$. We claim that f is a weak one-way function. Indeed, assume towards a contradiction that an efficient algorithm A inverts f with probability 0.99 for infinitely many input lengths n, and fix such large enough n. Let A' be the algorithm that uses A to invert g_x: given an input $x, g_x(y)$, A' samples y_1 and executes $A(x||h_x(y_1)||g_x(y))$ to get a pre-image of $g_x(y)$. Let B be the algorithm that given input x, samples random y_1, y_2, and runs A on $z = x||h_x(y_1)||g_x(y_2)$. If A failed in inverting f on z, B outputs $\perp$. Otherwise, B outputs $R^{A'}(x)$. We next show that B contradicts the assumption that $\Pi \notin \mathbf{ioAvgBPP/poly}$.

Observe that for every r such that $\mathcal{D}(r) \in \mathcal{I}$, A' can only invert $g_{\mathcal{D}}(r)$ with negligible probability and consequently, A inverts $f(r, \cdot)$ only with negligible probability. Thus B outputs $\perp$ on every (sufficiently large) such input with probability 0.99. On the other hand, for every r such that $\mathcal{D}(r) \notin \mathcal{I}$, B outputs either $\perp$ or the right answer with probability at least 0.99. Thus B outputs the wrong answer with probability at most 0.01 for any x. This implies the first item in Definition 2.1.

Next, to see that the second item holds, observe that for any r such that

$$\Pr_y\big[A(f(r, y) \in f^{-1}(f(r, y)))\big] \geq 0.9,$$

B outputs a (non-$\perp$) right answer with probability at least 0.9 (probability of running B) - 0.01 (probability that B outputs an incorrect answer) = 0.89. Moreover, by an averaging argument,

$$\Pr_r\big[\Pr_y\big[A(f(r, y) \in f^{-1}(f(r, y)))\big] \geq 0.9\big] \geq 0.9.$$

(since otherwise, it cannot be that A inverts f with probability 0.99). Thus, B outputs the right answer with probability at least $0.89 \cdot 0.9 \geq 3/4$. □

3.2 Step 2: io-OWF $\Rightarrow$ NP $\not\subseteq$ ioAvgBPP/poly

We turn to observing that io-OWFs imply (errorless) average-case hardness of **NP**; this observation may be folklore in the community but, as far as we can tell, was first explicitly stated in [HN24] using a somewhat more complicated proof for a stronger statement (in particular, they proved not only that **NP** is average-case hard but also that the particular MCSP problem [KC00] is so).[8]

Lemma 3.5 (ai-OWF to AvgBPP hardness)**.** *Assume that ai-OWF exists. Then there exists a language $\mathcal{L} \in \mathbf{NP}$ such that $(\mathcal{L}, \{U_{m(n)}\}_{n\in\mathbb{N}}) \notin \mathbf{ioAvgBPP/poly}$ for some $m \in$ poly.*

Proof. Let $\{f_x\}_{x\in\{0,1\}^*}$ be an ai-OWF. For every $x \in \{0,1\}^*$, let $G_x \colon \{0,1\}^{m(|x|)} \to \{0,1\}^{2m(|x|)}$ be the PRG construction of HILL from f_x with $m \in$ poly such that $m(|x|) > 2|x|$. [HILL99]. By [HILL99] it holds that (1) $G_x(s)$ can be efficiently computed given x, s, and (2) there is a reduction from distinguishing the output of G_x from uniform and inverting f_x. Let

$$\mathcal{L}_{\text{HILL}} = \Big\{y \colon \exists x \in \{0,1\}^*, s \in \{0,1\}^{m(|x|)} \text{ s.t. } G_x(s) = y\Big\},$$

[8] As mentioned, our proof directly extends also to showing that the MK$^{\text{t}}$P problem [Ko86] also is average-case hard—see Appendix A for more details—but this is not of relevance for proving the main result.

and let $\mathcal{D} = \left\{\mathcal{D}_n = U_{2m(n)}\right\}_{n\in\mathbb{N}}$. We claim that $(\mathcal{L}_{\text{HILL}}, \mathcal{D}) \in \mathbf{ioAvgBPP/poly}$. To see this, assume toward contradiction that $(\mathcal{L}_{\text{HILL}}, \mathcal{D}) \in \mathbf{ioAvgBPP/poly}$, and let A be the algorithm that decides $\mathcal{L}_{\text{HILL}}$ with good probability over the $\mathcal{D}_n$ for infinite many n's. We show that A can be used to invert $\{f_x\}$ for every $x \in \{0,1\}^n$ and for infinitely many n's.

Indeed, fix n such that A succeed on $\mathcal{D}_n$, and fix $x \in \{0,1\}^n$. Observe that $G_x(s) \in \mathcal{L}_{\text{HILL}}$ for any $s \in \{0,1\}^{m(n)}$. Thus, A outputs 1 or $\perp$ on x with probability at least 0.9 on every output of G_x. On the other hand,

$$\left|\mathcal{L}_{\text{HILL}} \cap \{0,1\}^{2m(n)}\right| \leq 2^n \cdot 2^{m(n)} \leq 2^{2m(n)-n}.$$

Therefore, it holds that $\Pr_{y\leftarrow U_{2m(n)}}[y \in \mathcal{L}_{\text{HILL}}] \leq 2^{-n}$, and thus

$$\Pr_{y\leftarrow U_{2m(n)}}[A(y) \neq 0] \leq 2^{-n} + 0.1 + 1/4 \leq 1/2.$$

We get that A distinguishes the output of G_x from random with advantage at least $0.9 - 0.5 = 0.4$. □

3.3 Concluding the Proof of Theorem 1.1

Proof of Theorem 1.1. Assume that $\mathbf{ZKA} \not\subseteq \mathbf{ioP/poly}$. By Theorem 2.3 ai-OWF exist. By Lemma 3.5, there exists $\mathcal{L} \in \mathbf{NP}$ and samplable distribution $\mathcal{D}$ such that $(\mathcal{L}, \mathcal{D}) \notin \mathbf{ioAvgBPP/poly}$. Finally, since by assumption $\mathbf{NP} \subseteq \mathbf{ZKA}$, we get by Lemma 3.1 that OWFs exist. □

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A On Average-case Hardness of $\mathrm{MK^tP}$

We here briefly observe that ai-OWF imply average-case hardness of the Minimum Kolmogorov complexity problem, $\mathrm{MK^tP}$ [Kol68; Ko86]; this result may be folklore in the community but as far as we know has not been explicitly stated (although a close variant of it can be found in [LP21a], following the approach in [Hir18]).

Recall that for a threshold $s = s(n)$, $\mathrm{MK^tP}[s]$ is the language of all strings $x \in \{0,1\}^*$ with $\mathrm{K}^t(x) \leq s(|x|)$. Similarly, $\mathrm{MK^tP}[s_0, s_1]$ is the promise problem in which the Yes instances are the strings with $\mathrm{K}^t(x) \leq s_0(|x|)$, and the No instances are the strings with $\mathrm{K}^t(x) > s_1(|x|)$. We prove the following theorem.

Theorem A.1. *Let $\epsilon > 0$ be a constant. Assuming that ai-OWF exist, $(\mathrm{MK^tP}[\epsilon n, (1-\epsilon)n], U_{m(n)}) \notin$ **ioAvgBPP/poly** for any $t(n) \geq n^{1+\epsilon}$ and some $m \in$ poly.*

Proof. Assume toward contradiction that $(\mathrm{MK^tP}[\epsilon n, (1-\epsilon)n], U_{m(n)}) \in$ **ioAvgBPP/poly** for any $m \in$ poly. We claim that there is no ai-OWF. Indeed, we can use the $\mathrm{MK^tP}$ solver to invert any function family $\{f_x\}_{x\in\{0,1\}^*}$ on every x of length n, for infinite many n's.

To see that, we use each function f_x to construct a PRG $G_x \colon \{0,1\}^{\epsilon\cdot m(n)/2} \to \{0,1\}^{m(n)}$ for some polynomial $m(n)$, such that (1) $\epsilon \cdot m(n)/2 \geq 2n$, (2) $G_x(z)$ can be computed in time at most $(m(n))^{1+\epsilon}$ given x and an input z, and (3) there is a reduction from distinguishing the output of G_x from uniform and inverting f_x.

Let A be the zero-error algorithm that for $(\mathrm{MK^tP}[\epsilon n, (1-\epsilon)n], U_{m(n)})$. Using the family $\{G_x\}$ and the algorithm A we can invert $\{f_x\}$ almost everywhere by the observation that A distinguish between the output of G_x and uniform $m(n)$ bit string for every choice of x of length n. Indeed, by the correctness of A, A must output No with probability at least $3/4 - \mathrm{neg}(n)$ over the uniform distribution. On the other hand, $\mathrm{K}^t(G_x(z)) \leq |z|+|x|+O(\log n) \leq \epsilon\cdot m(n)/2+n+(\log n) \leq \epsilon\cdot m(n)$ for any z, x. Thus, A must output $\perp$ or Yes on any output of G_x.

Finally, to construct G_x we use the PRG construction of HILL from the one-way function f_x to get a function $G' \colon \{0,1\}^{\epsilon\cdot m'(n)/2} \to \{0,1\}^{m'(n)}$. Let p' be a polynomial that bound the running time of G', and let $G_x(z_1, \ldots, z_{q(n)}) = G'_x(z_1)|| \ldots ||G'_x(z_{q(n)})$. Then G' can be computed in time roughly $q(n) \cdot p'(n)$, and the output length of G' is $m(n) := q(n) \cdot m'(n)$. By taking $q(n) \geq \max\{(p'(n))^{1/\epsilon}, 2n/\epsilon\}$ we get that G_x can be computed in time at most $(m(n))^{1+\epsilon}$. □

We directly get the following corollaries; the second one using the proof of Theorem 1.1.

Corollary A.2. *Let $\epsilon > 0$ be a constant. Assuming that ai-OWF exist, $(\mathrm{MK^tP}[(1-\epsilon)n], U_{m(n)}) \notin$ **ioAvgBPP/poly** for any $t(n) \geq n^{1+\epsilon}$ and some $m \in$ poly.*

Corollary A.3. *Assume that $\mathrm{MK^tP}[\epsilon n, (1-\epsilon)n] \in$ **ZKA** for some constant ϵ, and that **ZKA** $\notin$ **ioP/poly**. Then one-way functions exist.*