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THE HARDNESS OF THE PAST: A REPLY TO REICHENBACH

William Hasker

Bruce Reichenbach has presented an interesting and challenging set of objections to my argument for the incompatibility of human freedom and comprehensive divine foreknowledge.¹ All of his objections ultimately fail, in my opinion, but they do serve to exhibit the complexity of the problem. And I think it is only by examining objections patiently, carefully, and accurately that we can advance this vexed issue towards a resolution.

Reichenbach begins by asserting the familiar claim that facts about God's past beliefs are "soft facts" about the past and thus may be within our power to affect (though not to *alter*—another matter entirely). He gives an exposition, partial but so far accurate, of my explication of the distinction between hard and soft facts, and he notes my claim that

(14) Yahweh has always believed that Clarence will have a cheese omelet for breakfast tomorrow

is a hard fact. But Reichenbach objects to this: Yahweh is essentially God, and thus essentially omniscient, and thus cannot hold a false belief. "But then (14) is a candidate for being a soft fact, for (14) is not future-indifferent" (*HO*, p. 87).

Reichenbach anticipates my objection to this: According to my explication of the hard-soft fact distinction, considerations about the essential properties of individuals are not relevant to establishing whether or not propositions are future-indifferent.² Reichenbach, however, demurs:

It would seem that [*de re* considerations] are relevant in those cases where [they] are directly germane to the determination of the hardness or softness of a fact, that is, germane to determining whether it is in someone's power to make the proposition under consideration false. . . . The compatibilist then can argue that *de re* considerations are relevant to and cannot be excluded from considerations regarding Yahweh's beliefs about the future, for since his beliefs must be true . . . , his beliefs about the future cannot be future-indifferent; their truth depends necessarily on the future (*HO*, p. 88).

As Reichenbach recognizes, my criteria for the hard-soft fact distinction require

that *de re* necessary truths *not* be considered in identifying future-indifferent propositions. The reason for this, as I clearly indicate, is that considering *de re* necessary truths in determining this would eliminate virtually all candidates for the status of future-indifferent propositions, thus making the hard-soft fact distinction pointless. Reichenbach seems to see this, at least in part; he admits that “a universal admission of *de re* considerations effectively destroys the usefulness of making a distinction between hard and soft facts” (*HO*, p. 88), so he wants to consider only *some* of the *de re* necessary truths as relevant. But so far as I can see, he gives us no clue as to how we should determine these, and distinguish them from the others which must be excluded in order to preserve the hard-soft fact distinction. He admits that “to invoke an exception to a general application might be deemed suspicious” (*HO*, p.88). I couldn’t agree more completely!

Towards the end of his paper Reichenbach returns to the theme of hard and soft facts—but not, I fear, in a way which helps his cause. We can all readily understand that the *very same event* of Luther’s birth, *without any change in its intrinsic characteristics*, can count either as Luther’s-being-born-502-years-before-Reichenbach-writes or as Luther’s-being-born-502-years-before-Reichenbach-does-not-write, depending on what happens 502 years later. But can we at all understand that the *very same event of God’s believing* can, without change in any of *its* intrinsic characteristics, count *either* as God’s-believing-that-Clarence-will-eat-an-omelet *or* as God’s-believing-that-Clarence-will-not-eat-an-omelet? If we cannot, then the project of classifying God’s beliefs as soft facts is in deep trouble.

All this, however, is merely a curtain-raiser for Reichenbach’s principal objection, which is that my main argument for incompatibilism rests on an equivocation. The steps in which he finds the equivocation are the following:

(B3’) God has always believed that Clarence will have a cheese omelet tomorrow.

(B4) If God has always believed a certain thing, it is not in anyone’s power to bring it about that God has not always believed that thing.

(B5) Therefore, it is not in Clarence’s power to bring it about that God has not always believed that he would have a cheese omelet for breakfast.

Reichenbach writes:

The phrase “. . . bring it about that God has not always believed that thing” could either mean (a) bring it about that God has never believed that thing, or (b) bring it about that it once was but no longer is the case that God believed it . . . in the sense of a person somehow altering, retroactively, a fact about God’s prior belief The truth of (B4) under the first interpretation [(a)] does not follow—as Hasker claims

the truth of (B4) does—from the unalterability of the past, for it has nothing to do with altering the past, but rather with bringing about the past. The truth of (B4) under the second [(b)] follows from the unalterability of the past. Now whereas (B4) in sense (b) is true, (B4) in sense (a) is not true, for given the antecedent it is still in my or Clarence's power to bring it about that God has never believed a certain thing. It is only that that power has not been exercised. If it had been exercised, then God would not always have (never have) believed that thing (*HO*, p. 89).

So (B4) in sense (b) is true but irrelevant to my argument, whereas in sense (a), which is needed for the argument, it is not true.

What shall we say to this? Note, first of all, that a distinction very similar to the one Reichenbach makes is indeed noted in my paper. Consider the following two kinds of cases:

I. X occurred at T_1 , and at T_2 A brings it about that X occurred at T_1 .

II. X did not occur at T_1 , and at T_2 A brings it about that X occurred at T_1 .

The power to perform the sorts of actions described in (I) is called in my paper "power to bring about past events which have in fact taken place," whereas the power to perform the sorts of actions described in (II) is called "power to bring about events which might have taken place in the past but in fact did not" (*FN*, p. 145). The latter sort of power may well be termed the power to alter the past, and Reichenbach and I agree that it is impossible for anyone to have such a power. Is the former sort of power also impossible? In the present context there is no need to decide this; what is important to note is that *nowhere in my paper do I argue against the possibility of such a power, nor does anything in my argument for incompatibilism depend on the assumption that such powers are impossible*. For purposes of the present discussion, then, I am willing to assume that powers of the first type, powers to bring about past events which have in fact taken place, are possible and indeed that some people may actually have them.

So far, then, there is a surprising amount of agreement between Reichenbach and myself about the powers in question: We agree that powers to alter the past are impossible, and we also agree (at least for present purposes) that powers to bring about past events which have in fact taken place may be possible. What remains to be decided is this: Which sort of power over the past is relevant to the interpretation of (B4) and (B5) in my argument? If it is the latter type of power which is relevant, then (B4) is false and my argument fails. If on the other hand it is the power to alter the past which is relevant, then (B4) is true and the argument succeeds.

But the answer to this question is obvious. What is at stake in (B4) is our

power to bring it about that God has never held a certain belief, *given that God has in fact always held that belief*. Evidently this cannot be a power to bring about a past event which has in fact occurred; it must be, rather, the power to bring about something in the past which did *not* occur—that is, it must be the power to alter the past. And since it is agreed by all concerned that such powers are impossible, (B4) is vindicated.

Why doesn't Reichenbach agree with this? The answer, I believe, is that what *he* designates as the power to bring about the past is yet another kind of power, distinct from both of the kinds discussed above: It is neither the impossible power to alter the past, nor is it merely (!) the power to bring about past events which have already occurred. What sort of power this is, is a question to be carefully considered. Before going into this, however, I want to consider one other line of argument which he pursues.

Reichenbach cites, with apparent approval, my notion of a “precluding circumstance”—something about the circumstances under which one acts which eliminates the possibility of acting in some particular way. He does not, however, approve of the use I make of this notion. He writes:

Hasker asks, “Why is it that [Clarence] (apparently) lacks freedom to do X at T_2 ? Because God has always believed that [Clarence] would do X at T_2 , which logically precludes [Clarence] from refraining from doing X at T_2 ” [paraphrased from *FN*, p. 147]. But one might carry this another step. What is it that precludes God from having always believed that Clarence would not do X at T_2 ? It is that Clarence does X at T_2 . That is, from God's perspective (that of foreknowledge) it is as if Clarence has already done X at T_2 . Thus, what it is that apparently precludes Clarence from refraining from doing X at T_2 , is Clarence doing X at T_2 . But this relation—Clarence actually doing X at T_2 entailing that Clarence cannot refrain from doing X at T_2 —does not then remove Clarence's freedom regarding doing X at T_2 . It says nothing about the conditions under which Clarence does X at T_2 (*HO*, p. 90).

On the face of it, this seems to be a remarkable piece of reasoning. Stripped to essentials, its form seems to be: *P* precludes not-*Q*. But, *Q* precludes not-*P*. So, it is really *Q* that precludes not-*Q*; therefore, *P* does *not* preclude not-*Q*.³

Possibly this disaster is supposed to be averted by the assertion that from God's perspective it is “as if” Clarence has already done X at T_2 . Now just what this “as if” comes to is not at all clear to me,⁴ but one thing *is* clear: *As a matter of fact, Clarence has not “already” done X at T_2 ; rather, he has made no decision at all at T_2 until T_2 actually arrives. The circumstances under which he makes the decision include the fact that God has always believed that he will do X at T_2 , and the options which are open to him are all and only the things that it is*

possible for him to do, *given those circumstances*.⁵ These options, needless to say, do *not* include refraining from doing X at T₂.

But what of Reichenbach's claim that we do, indeed, have power over the past of a kind that renders (B4) (in the relevant sense) false? What kind of power can this be? It cannot be merely (!) the power to bring about past events which have already occurred, for that is a power we possess only when the event to be brought about has actually occurred in the past, whereas the power Reichenbach has in mind is not limited in this way. But neither can it be the power to alter the past, for Reichenbach admits this to be impossible. What else is there?

What we have to keep in mind here is that "there is a sense of 'power' in which a person's powers (normally) remain more or less constant, while the possibilities of their being exercised come and go" (FN, p. 152). The power over the past which Reichenbach has in mind is, I believe, of this kind.⁶ Clarence's power to bring about that God has not always believed that Clarence would have a cheese omelet for breakfast is *not* a power which Clarence has only in those worlds in which God lacks that belief. No, Clarence has that power also in the worlds in which God *does* believe he will have a cheese omelet for breakfast, but in *those* worlds it is impossible for him to exercise that power, for to do so would be to change the past, which is impossible. The power itself, then, is not limited to worlds in which the event has already occurred—but the possibility of the power's being exercised *is* so limited.

This, of course is the sense in which 'power' is generally used by soft determinists ("compatibilists" in the usual sense of that term, when it has not [as in the present discussion] been preempted for a narrower use). Indeed, this use of 'power' is one of the crucial distinctions between the soft determinist and libertarian views of free will. I certainly have the power to turn off the Monday night football game and get some needed sleep—nobody is compelling me to watch it, I keep watching it because I want to, if I were to choose to turn it off I could do so, and so on. Nevertheless, it may well be that my state of mind at this particular time is such that it is impossible for me actually to exercise my power to turn the game off. It is just this sense of 'power' which fits Reichenbach's use of the term. No doubt Clarence does, in this sense, have the "power" to refrain from eating an omelet. But the worlds in which he exercises this power are, one and all, worlds that are different from the actual world with respect to events that lie already in the past. In the actual world, God's past belief about what Clarence would do precludes his exercising the power to refrain from eating an omelet.

Would it not be a striking confirmation of the incompatibilist's thesis if it turns out that a compatibilist who wishes to affirm our power *over* the past but to deny our power to *change* the past, finds himself compelled

to use crucial terms like 'can' and 'power' in a way which generates "free will" only in the soft determinist and not in the libertarian sense of that term? (*FN*, p. 153)

NOTES

1. "Hasker on Omniscience," *Faith and Philosophy* 4 (1987), pp. 86-92, henceforth cited in the text by "*HO*" and the page number. Reichenbach's criticisms are directed at my article, "Foreknowledge and Necessity," *Faith and Philosophy* 2 (1985), pp. 121-157, cited hereafter with "*FN*" and the page number.

2. See *FN*, p. 133. In *FN* I speak of *de dicto* and *de re* necessary truths, with only the former being relevant to determining the future-indifferent propositions. Because of the variety of ways in which the *de dicto-de re* distinction is used, however, I now prefer to speak of "conceptually necessary" and "metaphysically necessary" propositions. For more on this see my "Hard Facts and Theological Fatalism," *Nous*, forthcoming.

3. In correspondence about this Response, Reichenbach restates his point by saying that "it is only in a trivial way that P precludes Q."

4. I don't think Reichenbach's "time travel" example (*HO*, pp. 90-91) is helpful here. It should be abundantly clear by now that the fact that such stories are in some way imaginable and intuitively graspable says nothing about their logical coherence.

5. Of course it does not matter that Clarence does not *know* what it is that God believes; it is no doubt often the case that we are causally prevented from taking a certain course of action, and yet are unaware of the fact. Such lack of awareness in no way allows the precluded action to be included among the things it is possible for us to do.

6. The same is true of the power over the past advocated by George Mavrodes (see his "Is the Past Unpreventable?" *Faith and Philosophy* 1 (1984), pp. 131-146; see also my comments in *FN*, pp. 144-154).