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REPLY TO BASINGER ON POWER ENTAILMENT

William Hasker

David Basinger has presented an interesting challenge to a central element in my argument against middle knowledge.¹ Before addressing this challenge, however, I wish to correct two misconceptions about my view which are reflected in Basinger's article. He represents me as holding that previous critics of middle knowledge have not been successful (*MKHF*, p. 331), when actually I find some of their arguments, particularly those presented by Robert Adams, to be forceful and extremely convincing.² What I do say is that previous discussions are "inconclusive" (*RMK*, p. 547), and the reason I say this is that these arguments rest on assumptions which proponents of middle knowledge are not obliged to accept; thus, there is room and need for additional arguments such as the one I present. But I do not think poorly of what others have done.

The other misconception is this: Basinger represents me as holding, not that counterfactuals of freedom are *false*, but that they are *incoherent* (*MKHF*, p. 332). But I do hold that all such counterfactuals are false. In any counterfactual situation in which a person would choose freely between various alternatives, what is true is that if confronted with such a situation she *might* choose *any one* of the alternatives; it follows from this that any statement claiming that, if placed in such a situation, she *would definitely* choose some *particular* alternative is false.³

Basinger proceeds by raising questions about my "power entailment principles," principles which are important not only for the present discussion but for the controversy over divine foreknowledge and human freedom.⁴ The two principles given in *RMK* are:

- (3) If it is in A's power to bring it about that P, and "P" entails "Q" and "Q" is false, then it is in A's power to bring it about that Q.
- (4) If it is in A's power to bring it about that P, and "P" entails "Q," then either it is in A's power to bring it about that Q, or the truth of "Q" is a necessary condition of A's having the power to bring it about that P.⁵

Basinger is correct in noting that these principles are crucial to my argument against middle knowledge. Indeed, given certain other assumptions (which Basinger also accepts), these principles suffice to show that counterfactuals of

freedom cannot be true.⁶ In his reply Basinger does not give any logical argument against my principles, nor does he cite any counter-examples to them. Rather, he presents a pair of principles of his own—principles which, he claims, are equivalent to mine in most contexts, but which diverge in such a way as to allow counterfactuals of freedom to be true. The proponent of middle knowledge, then, is at liberty to accept Basinger's principles instead of mine, and thus to claim that middle knowledge has not been refuted. Basinger's substitute principles are:

- (3') If it is in A's power to bring it about that P, and "P" entails "Q" and "Q" is false, then it is in A's power to act in such a manner that, if she were to act in that fashion, "Q" would be (would always have been) true.
- (4') If it is in A's power to bring it about that P, and "P" entails "Q," then either it is in A's power to act in such a way that if she were to act in that way, "Q" would be (would always have been) true or the truth of "Q" is a necessary condition of A's having the power to bring it about that P (*MKHF*, p. 334).

I want to say at once that both (3') and (4') seem to me to be true. And Basinger is certainly correct in thinking that, unlike (3) and (4), his principles place no obstacle in the way of the theory of middle knowledge. But are they appropriate as *replacements* for (3) and (4)? In order to answer this, we need to see whether (3') and (4') are capable of performing, in their own way, the function which (3) and (4) were introduced to perform. That function may be described, in general terms, as that of identifying various states of affairs which are *necessary conditions* of persons' having the power to do various things. Basinger evidently thinks that there are such conditions, and that in many situations (3) and (4) are useful in identifying them. He has no difficulty with the idea that in order for me to have the power to see the sunrise, the sun must in fact be rising, and in order for me to be able to ring your doorbell it must be the case either that you already have a doorbell or I am able to provide you with one (*MKHF*, pp. 333). But he claims that with regard to the sunrise and doorbell examples, his principles and mine "come to the same thing" (*MKHF*, p. 335).

Unfortunately, Basinger is wrong about this. As he observes, his principles differ from mine by replacing my phrase "then it is in A's power to bring it about that Q," with the longer phrase "then it is in A's power to act in such a manner that, if she were to act in that manner "Q" would be (would always have been) true" (*MKHF*, p. 334). But this change empties the principles of their force. In all four principles the antecedent of the conditional includes the phrase, "and "P" entails "Q."" But if "P" entails "Q," then for A to have the power to bring it about that P just *is* for her to have the power to "act in such a manner that, if she were to act in that manner "Q" would be (would always have been)

true"! So the consequents in Basinger's principles fail entirely to specify any *additional* necessary conditions which must be satisfied if A is to have the power to bring it about that P. The conditions specified in the consequents of (3') and (4') are *automatically* satisfied if the antecedents of the conditionals are true, and both "principles" reduce to the tautology

- (T) If it is in A's power to bring it about that P, and etc. . . . then it is in A's power to bring it about that P.

The truth of this need not be doubted. But it can scarcely do the job for which the power entailment principles were designed.

Basinger seems to see this, at least in part, yet he fails to grasp its implications. With respect to his 'counterfactual' doorbell example (the one in which the proposition represented by 'Q' is itself a counterfactual) he states:

In short, given (3'), the stipulated condition in question becomes tautological—i.e., A has it in her power to bring it about that P only if she has it in her power to bring it about that P—while given (3), this is not the case (*MKHF*, p. 335).

Apparently, however, Basinger has failed to recognize that his principles collapse into tautology not only in this case, but in all others as well. He has given us no alternatives to the power entailment principles.

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NOTES

1. David Basinger, "Middle Knowledge and Human Freedom: Some Clarifications," *Faith and Philosophy*, 4 (1987), pp.330-336 (hereafter cited as *MKHF*). Basinger is criticizing my article, "A Refutation of Middle Knowledge," *Nous*, 20 (1986), pp. 545-557 (hereafter cited as *RMK*).
2. See Robert M. Adams, "Middle Knowledge and the Problem of Evil," *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 14 (1977), pp. 109-117.
3. It should be noted that, in counterfactual logic, the proposition, "If it were the case that P, it might be the case that not-Q," is the *contradictory* of the proposition, "If it were the case that P, it would be the case that Q." See David Lewis, *Counterfactuals* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973).
4. For this application see my article, "Foreknowledge and Necessity," *Faith and Philosophy*, 2 (1985), pp. 142-44.
5. *RMK*, pp. 553, 554 (numbering of these principles taken from *MKHF*, p. 331). At this point I need to correct an oversight of my own with regard to principle (4). This principle is adapted from

Thomas B. Talbott, "On Divine Foreknowledge and Bringing About the Past," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 46, 1986, p. 460. In this connection Talbott states, "[I]t must . . . be stressed that the kind of necessary condition specified in [4] is not a logically necessary condition . . . [F]or those of us who are not omnipotent, not all the necessary conditions of our having the power to do something are logically necessary conditions" (Talbott, p. 461). Though aware of this qualification, I failed to mention it either in *RMK* or in "Foreknowledge and Necessity", and thus may have given some readers the impression that (only) logically necessary conditions were in view here. (I am indebted to Larry Hohm for pointing out this oversight.)

6. It should be noted, however, that a proponent of middle knowledge might proceed by challenging the first part of my argument, which claims that the agent named in a counterfactual of freedom cannot bring about the truth of the counterfactual. If this could be refuted, then both the power entailment principles and middle knowledge could be accepted.