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IN DEFENCE OF THEOLOGICAL COMPATIBILISM

Thomas P. Flint

William Hasker has recently attacked the thesis that divine foreknowledge and human freedom are compatible. Hasker sees only two ways his opponents could respond to his argument: claim that we have causal power over God's past beliefs, or claim that we have counterfactual power over them. Hasker employs two principles in an attempt to show that the latter of these compatibilist responses collapses into the first, which he then criticizes. I argue that Hasker fails to discredit the second response, for his principles would be rejected by his adversaries, and his defence of the second principle is tantamount to begging the question.

The argument for the incompatibility of human freedom and divine foreknowledge has recently been defended in a lucid and provocative manner by William Hasker.¹ As Hasker sees it, the most plausible means of defending what he calls compatibilism (the thesis that our freedom is not in conflict with God's prescience) requires that we have either counterfactual power over the past or causal power over the past. After arguing that the former type of power collapses into the latter type in the case of God's beliefs, Hasker contends that one can hold that we have causal power over the past only if one is willing to surrender the libertarian notion of freedom. Since few of those who embrace compatibilism re divine foreknowledge would be eager to enter into a permanent relationship with compatibilism re freedom, it follows that few philosophers should find the former type of compatibilism appealing.

Despite the genuine virtues exhibited by his paper, it seems to me that Hasker's argument comes very close to exhibiting that tempting and perfidious (albeit difficult to define) philosophical vice of begging the question. As one might expect with a philosopher of Hasker's caliber, the problem does not lie at the surface. Nevertheless, it seems clear to me that a bit of excavation will suffice to reveal his argument's shaky foundations.

Before digging into its deficiencies, let us first consider the argument in the form in which Hasker presents it. Mercifully granting Jones and his lawnmower a sabbatical, Hasker presents the argument via the example of "Clarence, an aficionado [*sic*] of cheese omelets, and...the question, will Clarence have such an omelet for breakfast tomorrow morning, or won't he?"

If we assume the answer to be affirmative, Hasker suggests, we can construct the following, easily generalizable, argument for incompatibilism:

- (B1) It is now true that Clarence will have a cheese omelet for breakfast tomorrow. (premise)
- (B2) It is impossible that God should at any time believe what is false, or fail to believe anything which is true. (Premise: divine omniscience)
- (B3) Therefore, God has always believed that Clarence will have a cheese omelet for breakfast tomorrow. (From 1, 2)
- (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. (Premise: the unalterability of the past)
- (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. (From 3, 4)
- (B6) It is not possible for it to be true both that God has always believed that Clarence would have a cheese omelet for breakfast, and that he does not in fact have one. (From 2)
- (B7) Therefore, it is not in Clarence's power to refrain from having a cheese omelet for breakfast tomorrow. (From 5, 6) So Clarence's eating the omelet tomorrow is not an act of free choice.

As Hasker sees it, there are two compatibilist ways of responding to this argument which need to be taken seriously. On the one hand, one might (following George Mavrodes) simply reject (B4).² That is, one might contend that a person can indeed have causal power over the past. Hence, even if (B3) is true, Clarence might well still even now have the power to cause it to be the case that God didn't believe that Clarence would have a cheese omelet for breakfast tomorrow. On the other hand, one might (following Alvin Plantinga) accept (B4), but reject the inference from (B5) and (B6) to (B7).³ According to Hasker, those who take this second option see us as having, not causal power over the past, but only what he calls counterfactual power over the past. Clarence, for example, does not have the power to cause it to be the case that God didn't believe he would make the omelet; but he does have the power to do something (namely, refrain from making the omelet) such that, if he were to do it, then God would never have believed that Clarence would make an omelet for breakfast tomorrow.

Hasker's strategy in meeting these responses is one of unite and conquer. He first attempts to show that, at least in the case of God's past beliefs, the distinction between causal and counterfactual power over the past collapses; hence, the Plantingean position is tenable only if the Mavrodean position is defensible. He then attempts to undermine the Mavrodean stance by arguing that the notion of freedom which it employs is not a true libertarian notion.

Of course, an examination of the second half of this strategy is necessary only if one concludes that the first half—i.e., the purported fusion of Plantinga and Mavrodes—has in fact been accomplished. Now, to show that Plantinga's position dissolves into Mavrodes', one needs to show that (B7) does indeed follow from (B5) and (B6). Suppose we employ the following abbreviations:

P = Clarence has the power to bring it about [i.e., to cause it to be the case] that

a = Clarence will not have a cheese omelet for breakfast tomorrow

b = God has always believed that Clarence would have a cheese omelet for breakfast tomorrow

We could then represent (B5) through (B7) as:

(B5) $\sim P \sim b$

(B6) $\sim \diamond (a \ \& \ b)$

(B7) $\sim Pa$

Hasker's task, then, is to show that [(B5) & (B6)] implies (B7); that is, that

(X) $[\sim P \sim b \ \& \ \sim \diamond (a \ \& \ b)] \supset \sim Pa$.⁴

Hasker attempts to support (X) by appealing to two power entailment principles which he borrows from Thomas Talbott.⁵ The first of these reads as follows:

(PEP3) If (a) it is within *S*'s power to bring it about that *P* is true and (b) it is within *S*'s power to bring it about that *P* is false and (c) *P* entails *Q* and not-*P* entails not-*Q*, then it is within *S*'s power to bring it about that *Q* is true.

Now, though it is not immediately evident how (PEP3) is supposed to justify (X), it seems clear that something like Hasker's argument would succeed were this principle to be accepted. Let "*P*" stand for "Clarence refrains from having a cheese omelet tomorrow", "*Q*" for "God has always believed that Clarence would refrain from having a cheese omelet tomorrow" and "*S*" for Clarence. Interpreted in this way, all three parts of the antecedent of (PEP3) will be affirmed by Plantingians, but its consequent will surely be denied, for that consequent asserts that Clarence has causal power over God's past beliefs, and as we have seen, the Plantingian wishes to grant Clarence only counterfactual power. If (PEP3) is true, then, the Plantingian position is surely in trouble.

But why think that (PEP3) is true? Hasker says little in its defence. Rather than argue for it, he merely quotes (approvingly) Talbott's defence of it. (PEP3), says Talbott, "seems not only true but obviously true. Where *P* and *Q* are logically equivalent, it could hardly be up to me whether or not *P* is

true unless it were also up to me whether or not Q is true.”⁶ Though what Talbott says here is surely plausible, it actually falls far short of warranting the acceptance of (PEP3). For once we recognize that the notion of power can be given (at a minimum) the two interpretations relevant to a discussion of the Plantingean position—causal power as opposed to counterfactual power—it becomes apparent that the truth expressed by Talbott by no means entails (PEP3). If two propositions are logically equivalent and I have power over the truth of one of them (i.e., its truth is up to me), then it does seem clear that the truth of the other one is within my power as well; what does not seem clear is that I need to have power in the same sense of “power” over the second as over the first. Suppose I have causal power over the truth of one of two logically equivalent propositions; is it not sufficient that I have counterfactual power over the other? Is that not enough for me to say that each of them is such that its truth is up to me?⁷ Hasker gives us no reason to think not. Hence, his defense of his argument via (PEP3) fails.

As noted, though, Hasker believes that another principle formulated by Talbott can also be used to support the derivation of (B7). This principle is:

(PEP4) If (a) it is within S 's power to bring it about that P is true, (b) P entails Q , and (c) Q is not a necessary condition of S 's having the power to bring it about that P is true, then it is within S 's power to bring it about that Q is true.

As with (PEP3), the connection between (PEP4) and (X) is not particularly pellucid. Still, the usefulness of (PEP4) for Hasker's purposes is clear, as the reader may ascertain by again letting “ S ” stand for Clarence, “ P ” for “Clarence refrains from having a cheese omelet tomorrow” and “ Q ” for “God has always believed that Clarence would refrain from having a cheese omelet tomorrow.” If (PEP4) is true, the Plantingean position is rendered untenable.

But why think that (PEP4) is true? Hasker quotes the following “proof” by Talbott, a “proof” which he deems “both elegant and conclusive”⁸:

If P entails Q , then it's within the power of a person S to bring it about that P is true only if at least one of these conditions is met: either Q is true or, if not true, then it's within S 's power to bring it about that Q is true. Suppose, then, that P entails Q and it's not within S 's power to bring it about that Q is true. It immediately follows that, unless Q is true, it's not within S 's power to bring it about that P is true either; it follows, in other words, that Q is a necessary condition of S 's having the power to bring it about that P is true.⁹

Now, let's consider this argument for (PEP4). In particular, let's focus on the first sentence of the quotation from Talbott, a sentence which presents a long and somewhat daunting premise. Suppose we again let “ P ” abbreviate “Clarence has the power to bring it about that” and change Talbott's upper case P and Q into lower case p and q . Talbott's premise (applied to Clarence) could then be seen to have the form:

If p entails q , then Pp only if either q or Pq .

But this is obviously equivalent to

If p entails q and Pp , then either q or Pq ,

which in turn is equivalent to

If p entails q and Pp and $\sim q$, then Pq .

Using the double-line arrow ($\Rightarrow$) to represent entailment (i.e., strict implication), we can thus present Talbott's premise as

(Z) $(p \Rightarrow q \ \& \ Pp \ \& \ \sim q) \supset Pq$.

Now, for (Z) to play a role in supporting (PEP4), and thereby in the defense of Hasker's argument for incompatibilism, it would have to be the kind of premise which one would expect any reasonable Plantingean to accept. On the face of it, though, (Z) simply does not appear to be such a premise; indeed, given their views on our inability to bring about God's past beliefs, Plantingians would almost surely see nothing at all in (Z)'s favor. So it's hard to see how the trotting forth of (Z) suffices to show that the entailment of (B7) by (B5) and (B6) is something of which, as Hasker injudiciously puts it, "there can be no reasonable doubt."¹⁰

But the problem with (Z) runs deeper than its controversial nature within this dialectical context. Suppose we transpose the first two conjuncts of its antecedent; we would then have as an equivalent principle

(Z₁) $(Pp \ \& \ p \Rightarrow \sim p \ \& \ \sim q) \supset \sim Pq$,

which in turn would obviously yield the equivalent

(Z₂) $(\sim Pq \ \& \ p \Rightarrow q \ \& \ \sim q) \supset \sim Pp$.

Given the definition of entailment, (Z₂) is itself equivalent to

(Z₃) $[\sim Pq \ \& \ \sim \Diamond (p \ \& \ q) \ \& \ \sim q] \supset Pp$

Now, any one of these equivalent (Z)s is supposed to be a general principle applicable to any pair of propositions. So suppose we apply (Z₃) to the case of Clarence and the omelet. Replacing p with our original a (Clarence will not have a cheese omelet for breakfast tomorrow) and q with $\sim b$ (It's not the case that God has always believed that Clarence would have a cheese omelet for breakfast tomorrow), we can derive

(Y) $[\sim P\sim b \ \& \ \sim \Diamond (a \ \& \ b) \ \& \ b] \supset \sim Pa$

as an instantiation of (Z₃). But once we see that (Z₃) is nothing more than a universal generalization of (Y), it becomes apparent that Hasker's second argument for (X) is at least in the neighborhood of begging the question. For (Y) is virtually equivalent to (X). The only difference between the two is that (Y) has b as a third conjunct in its antecedent. But this difference is less than

negligible, since it is a common assumption of all compatibilists that, as premise (B3) states, *b* is true. Thus, the Plantingean who questions the truth of (X) will have equal doubts concerning (Y). Since Talbott's premise (Z) is equivalent to (Z₃), and since (Z₃) is nothing more than the universal generalization of (Y), it seems clear that no intelligent Plantingean should be expected to be swayed toward (X) by an argument which takes (Z) as one of its premises. And insofar as the only argument for (PEP4) which Hasker offers does employ (Z) as its sole premise, it follows that Hasker has provided the Plantingean no reason whatsoever to think that (PEP4) is true.

Since neither of his attempts to fuse the compatibilist positions of Plantinga and Mavrodes succeeds, the criticisms Hasker offers of the latter's position are irrelevant to an evaluation of the Plantingean stance. Hence, Hasker fails to show that the libertarian should view God's foreknowledge as incompatible with our freedom.¹¹

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NOTES

1. William Hasker, "Foreknowledge and Necessity," *Faith and Philosophy* 2 (1985), pp. 121-57.

2. See George Mavrodes, "Is the Past Unpreventable?," *Faith and Philosophy* 1, pp. 131-46.

3. See Alvin Plantinga, "On Ockham's Way Out," *Faith and Philosophy* 3 (1986), pp. 235-69.

4. Actually, (X) could be presented as an entailment rather than a material conditional, for Hasker is clearly committed to saying that [(B5) & (B6)] logically implies (B7). However, since his Plantingean opponents will deny that even such material implications are true, and since employing material rather than logical implications will make the discussion of his argument a bit simpler, I have chosen to formulate (X) as a material implication. The same course has been followed later in this paper with conditionals such as (Y) and (Z).

5. Thomas Talbott, "On Divine Foreknowledge and Bringing About the Past," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 46 (1986), pp. 455-69.

6. Talbott, p. 458.

7. Are there, one might ask, examples (*other* than the sort of which our statements concerning Clarence's action and God's foreknowing are instances) the Plantingean might offer of logically equivalent propositions only one of which is under a person's causal power? Suppose we let "P" stand for "Clarence feeds his iguana" and "Q" for "God wills that Clarence feed his iguana," where the object of God's willing is understood to include both those actions which God intends to be performed and those which he merely permits to be performed. Would it not be reasonable here to hold that Clarence has causal power

over P, but only counterfactual power over Q? Or take the case where "P" stands for "Jesus says that Peter will freely deny him" and "Q" for "Peter will freely deny Jesus, just as Jesus says he will." Does it not seem plausible to say that Jesus has causal power over P, but only counterfactual power over Q? Whether or not these examples can be considered in isolation from the freedom-foreknowledge dispute is, I think, debatable; still, they do seem to me to offer further evidence against (PEP3).

8. Hasker, p. 143.

9. Talbott, p. 460.

10. Hasker, p. 144.

11. I am grateful to William Alston, Alfred Freddoso and Alvin Plantinga for comments on an earlier draft of this paper.