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# ZAGZEBSKI ON POWER ENTAILMENT

William Hasker

In her book, *The Dilemma of Freedom and Foreknowledge*, Linda Zagzebski devotes considerable attention to the "power entailment principles." Acknowledging that these principles make things quite difficult for theological compatibilism, she offers three counterexamples in an attempt to show that the principles are false. In this paper her counterexamples are refuted.

In her remarkably enjoyable book, *The Dilemma of Freedom and Foreknowledge*,<sup>1</sup> Linda Zagzebski devotes considerable attention to the so-called "power entailment principles." Indeed, she recognizes that if any of these principles are true this creates serious difficulties for most versions of theological compatibilism. Consider, for example, the following principle:

(PEP 1) 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 (p. 108).<sup>2</sup>

If God is essentially possessed of comprehensive foreknowledge, then

Necessarily, God believes at  $t_1$  that I will do *X* at  $t_2$  if and only if I do *X* at  $t_2$ .

But then, if it is true (as theological compatibilists and other libertarians believe) that my action at  $t_2$  may be free in the sense that it is within my power either to perform it or not, it follows that I have the power to bring about the past, namely to bring about God's past beliefs. But such powers Zagzebski, no doubt wisely, rejects (see p. 108).

She proposes three interestingly different kinds of counterexamples to (PEP 1).<sup>3</sup> The first of these is based on the observation that "if any necessary truths and their negations can be brought about by anybody while others can be brought about by nobody, all of these PEPs are false" (p. 110). Zagzebski supposes that this is the case, and proposes to

focus on a special category of truths that may be necessary and that yet are definitely in the category of those brought about by God. These are truths involving God's plan of salvation. For example, consider the proposition

(11) If there is a Fall, God sends his Son to redeem the world.

God brings about the truth of (11) and it seems to me to be compatible with the goodness of God that he not bring about (11) if he so choose. That is,



God has the power to bring about (11) and the power to bring about the negation of (11). But couldn't God decide to send a redeemer in *any* circumstances in which there was a fall? Doesn't God have the power to decide that no matter what happened, if there was a fall, there would be a redemption? If so, it would be the case that (11) is a necessary truth, true in all possible worlds. And it would be a necessary truth precisely because God decided in a certain way, a way in which he could have decided differently. But if so, we can construct a counterexample to PEP 1.

Let  $S = \text{God}$ . For  $q$  substitute the proposition *God exists*. For  $p$  substitute the proposition (11). Now, even if it is within God's power to bring it about that (11) is true and within God's power to bring it about that (11) is false, and even though (11) entails *God exists* and the negation of (11) entails *It is not the case that God exists*, it is not within God's power to bring about the truth of *God exists* (p. 111).

Zagzebski recognizes, of course, that her counterexample requires a non-standard view of modal logic. She cites Descartes, along with a few others, in support of her contention that such a non-standard view merits serious consideration. She writes,

The modal metaphysics associated with this view deserves extensive analysis that I cannot provide here. But for the purpose of casting doubt on the PEPs, it is sufficient to show that those principles make common but unargued assumptions about the relation between modality and the power to choose. In the case of divine power, I seriously doubt these assumptions are correct (pp. 112-13).

This strategy strikes me as misguided. The modal theory presupposed by the PEPs has hardly been pulled out of a hat; rather, it is the result of a great deal of intensive reflection on these matters, especially in the present century. (Many readers will think of Plantinga's *The Nature of Necessity*.) The upshot of this reflection (as Zagzebski acknowledges) is that most, though not quite all, philosophers concerned with these matters have concluded that the assumptions involved in the standard view merit acceptance. The fact that these assumptions may not have been established to Zagzebski's full satisfaction is hardly enough to constitute a serious objection to the PEPs; for that, we would need really strong reasons for thinking something is wrong with the standard theory.

Indeed, things may be even worse for Zagzebski than these remarks indicate. Consider the following principles:

- i) A proposition is necessarily true if and only if it is true in all possible worlds.
- ii) A property is essential to an individual if and only if the individual has the property in every possible world in which the individual exists.
- iii) God, God's states, and God's attributes are included in the possible worlds rather than outside them. (I.e., a possible world is a comprehensive "way things could be" for *everything*, not just for all *non-divine* things.)

i-iii are not, it seems to me, substantive logical principles, on the order of Conditional Exclusive Middle or Barcan's Formula. Rather, they are best understood as *stipulations* which specify (in part) the *meaning* respectively of "necessary proposition," "essential property," and "possible world." These stipulations are of course widely accepted; indeed it is clear that *Zagzebski herself accepts them in other parts of her book*. (See for example pp. 3-6.) But given these stipulations, Zagzebski's counterexample fails. Either God decrees in every possible world that (11) is true, or he does not. If he does not, then (11) is not necessary, and the example fails. If he does, then the property of decreeing that (11) is true is one God has in all possible worlds, and so is an *essential* property of God's. But it's not in God's power to shed one of his essential properties, any more than it is in my power to divest myself of my own essential properties. So once again, the example fails.

In view of this, it's clear that Zagzebski has a great deal of work to do if she wants to get her counterexample taken seriously. It is not enough for her to elaborate in detail her alternative modal theory, though that certainly needs to be done. It's not even enough were she to conform her own usage to the dictates of the alternative theory, instead of operating within the standard theory as she does for the most part in her book. What she really needs to do is to show that the standard theory is *inconsistent or incoherent*, and therefore that PEPs which presuppose this theory are inadmissible.

But now suppose, completely contrary to fact, that all of this has been done—suppose, that is, that we have come to see debilitating flaws in standard modal theory, including principles i-iii, and have been forced to accept instead Zagzebski's alternative, according to which God has the power with respect to some, but not all, necessary truths to make them either true or false. Under these suppositions, (PEP1) would have been shown to be false. If all this had actually been done, would this make things better for theological compatibilism? Not really. For consider the principle derived from (PEP1) by adding a fourth conjunct to the antecedent, namely "(d) *p* is contingent." The resulting principle is *not* falsified by Zagzebski's counterexample—and it still has the unwelcome consequence that we have power to bring about God's past beliefs. So what has been gained?<sup>4</sup>

Zagzebski's second counterexample builds on the first but adds new elements, specifically the claim that human beings, as well as God, can have powers that contravene the PEPs. She says

Let *A* be some ordinary human act that I have the power to bring about and the power not to bring about. Suppose also that from all eternity God decided that whenever I would do *A* he would do *B* subsequently, and that he would do *B* only when I do *A*, and that this decision would obtain no matter what else was the case. We need not concern ourselves with the question of whether such a decision is determined by the divine nature or whether it is free in some stronger sense. It matters only that I played no part in the decision

myself. In addition, suppose that God is essentially omniscient, so it is true in every possible world that whenever I do *A* God knows that I do *A*, and whenever God believes that I do *A*, I do *A*. It would then be the case that

□ (*I do A* ↔ *God does B*).

The propositions *I do A* and *God does B* would be strictly equivalent, and their strict equivalence would be something brought about by God, not me. Finally, suppose that I know nothing about *B*, am incapable of even understanding *B*, and therefore cannot form the intention of acting in such a way as to bring about *B*.

In this case we have a counterexample to each of the PEPs. I have the power to bring it about that *I do A* is true, and I have the power to bring it about that *I do A* is false. *I do A* entails *God does B* and *It is not the case that I do A* entails *It is not the case that God does B*. Yet I do not have the power to bring it about that *God does B* is true. The truth of that proposition is brought about by God. So PEP 1 is false (p. 113).

In view of our discussion of the previous example, we must reject Zagzebski's claim that "We need not concern ourselves with the question of whether such a decision is determined by the divine nature or whether it is free in some stronger sense." If this decision is *not* determined by the divine nature, the resulting biconditional will not be true in all possible worlds and will not be necessary. So let's suppose that the decision *is* determined by God's nature. (For instance, let "A" be "I perform an act of gratuitous cruelty," and make "B" "God is displeased with my act of gratuitous cruelty.") Given this stipulation, will the example work?

Unfortunately, the example involves a misunderstanding. If we interpret "bring about" as meaning "*consciously and intentionally* bring about," then it's abundantly clear that the PEPs are false. But I had no such meaning in mind in setting up these principles; this should have been clear from my saying that "brings about" is entailed by, though weaker than, "causes."<sup>5</sup> When Socrates' jailor gave Socrates the poison, he brought about Xantippe's becoming a widow—whether or not he knew that Socrates was married. And in practicing gratuitous cruelty we bring it about that God is displeased with us, whether or not we are aware of the fact. So this counterexample also fails.

The third counterexample proceeds from the assumption that some counterfactuals of freedom are true.<sup>6</sup>

Consider one such proposition, *If my son asked me for an apple I would not give him poison*. Let us symbolize this proposition as  $A > \sim P$ . In Lewis's account of counterfactuals, this proposition is (nonvacuously) true as long as there is some world in which *A* is true and *P* is false that is closer to the actual world than any world in which *A* is true and *P* is true. All possible worlds can be ranked according to their degree of similarity to the actual world. Take the set of worlds closer to the actual world than the closest *A/P* world. All of these worlds are *A/∼P* worlds. Since this set of worlds is similar

to at least a certain fixed degree to the actual world, they all have a certain property in common that is lacking in all the  $A/P$  worlds. Call this property  $\emptyset$ . Now form the counterfactual conditional  $(A \ \& \ \emptyset) > \sim P$ . This conditional is necessarily true. In every world in which it is true that  $A$  and  $\emptyset$ , it is false that  $P$ . This means, of course, that it is necessarily false that  $\sim[(A \ \& \ \emptyset) > \sim P]$ . So as long as counterfactuals can be reduced to strict implications based on comparative similarity of worlds in a Lewis manner, and as long as there are true counterfactuals of freedom, there are also true strict implications of freedom.

Zagzebski goes on to speculate that those counterfactuals of freedom which are true are *made to be true* by the *agents* named in the counterfactuals:

That is, a counterfactual such as  $A > \sim P$  and the corresponding strict conditional are true because I would freely choose to make  $\sim P$  true in the requisite circumstances. So I have the power to make it the case that  $(A \ \& \ \emptyset) > \sim P$  and I have the power to make it the case that  $\sim[(A \ \& \ \emptyset) > \sim P]$  instead. But the proposition  $\sim[(A \ \& \ \emptyset) > \sim P]$  is strictly equivalent to  $2 + 2 = 5$ . However, I do not have the power to make  $2 + 2 = 5$  true. We have, then, another counterexample to PEP 1 (pp. 114-15).

This argument contains a couple of logical slips which are not, however, crucial to its soundness. First, it is not the case that all the worlds closer to the actual world than the closest  $A/P$  world are  $A/\sim P$  worlds; many of them may rather be  $\sim A$  worlds. Second, note that Zagzebski's formula ' $(A \ \& \ \emptyset) > \sim P$ ' is, strictly speaking, ill-formed, since ' $A$ ' stands for a *proposition* and ' $\emptyset$ ' for a *property*. To remedy this, let's use ' $\text{Prop}(\emptyset)$ ' to stand for that proposition which is true of a given world just in case  $\emptyset$  is a property of that world. And now Zagzebski's claim is that  $(A \ \& \ \text{Prop}(\emptyset)) > \sim P$  is a necessary truth, but one which is brought about by the agent.

Does her argument succeed? What exactly *is* the proposition which we are representing by ' $\text{Prop}(\emptyset)$ '? A little reflection suggests the following:

$\text{Prop}(\emptyset)$  =df Things are more like they are in the actual world than they are in any  $A/P$  world.

So far, so good. But  $\text{Prop}(\emptyset)$  entails a somewhat simpler proposition, namely

$\text{Prop}(\emptyset)'$  =df Things are different than they are in any  $A/P$  world.

But this, in turn, is equivalent to

$\text{Prop}(\emptyset)''$  =df  $\sim(A \ \& \ P)$ .

So  $(A \ \& \ \text{Prop}(\emptyset))$  entails  $(A \ \& \ \sim(A \ \& \ P))$ —and it should be no surprise that  $(A \ \& \ \text{Prop}(\emptyset)) > \sim P$  is a necessary truth, one which in no way owes its truth to the agent of the counterfactual. And if we let ' $\psi$ ' designate the property of being more similar to the actual world than any world in which  $A \ \& \ \sim P$  is true, then  $(A \ \& \ \text{Prop}(\psi)) > P$  will also be a necessary truth, but one which owes nothing to what Zagzebski would do when her son asked her for an

apple. That is to say: there are “true strict implications of freedom” corresponding not only to all *true* counterfactuals of freedom, but to all the *false* ones as well!

In conclusion, then, I welcome Zagzebski’s recognition that the power entailment principles make things uncomfortable for theological compatibilists. But if she and her fellow compatibilists are going to undermine those principles, they have some work to do.

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### NOTES

1. New York: Oxford University Press, 1991. (Page references in the text are to this volume.)

2. This principle is originally due to Thomas Talbott. For more on the power entailment principles, see my *God, Time, and Knowledge* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), pp. 104-15.

Zagzebski also considers two other PEPs. But her counterexamples apply to all three—and in general, if there are counterexamples to one of the PEPs there will be counterexamples to all of them. So in the interests of conciseness, I will limit myself to the one given in the text.

3. For other criticisms of the PEPs, see David Basinger, “Middle Knowledge and Human Freedom: Some Clarifications,” *Faith and Philosophy* 4 (1987), pp. 330-36; my reply is found in “Reply to Basinger on Power Entailment,” *Faith and Philosophy* 5 (1988), pp. 87-90; Thomas Flint, “In Defense of Theological Compatibilism,” *Faith and Philosophy* 8 (1991), pp. 237-43; *reply in God, Time, and Knowledge*, pp. 104-15; Thomas Flint, “Hasker’s *God, Time, and Knowledge*,” *Philosophical Studies* 60 (1990), pp. 103-15; *reply in “Response to Thomas Flint,” Philosophical Studies* 60 (1990), pp. 117-26.

4. I want to thank Philip Quinn for suggesting to me the point made in this paragraph.

5. See *God, Time, and Knowledge*, pp. 105-7.

6. Zagzebski’s view is that there are some true counterfactuals of freedom, but not nearly as many of them as are required by the theory of middle knowledge.