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PROVIDENCE, FOREKNOWLEDGE, AND DECISION PROCEDURES

Tomis Kapitan

In "Divine Providence and Simple Foreknowledge" (*Faith and Philosophy* this issue) David Paul Hunt defends the possibility of a providential use of foreknowledge against what he calls the "Doxastic Problem." This problem stems from an alleged incompatibility between decision and prescience, and Hunt attempts to disarm a version of it that I presented in 1984. However, Hunt's criticisms fail to address the argument that if deciding presupposes belief in an open future, and the latter requires a sense of contingency with respect to what one takes oneself to believe, then an omniprescient being can never decide to do anything.

In "Divine Providence and Simple Foreknowledge" (*Faith and Philosophy* this issue) David Paul Hunt attempts to remove some challenges to the possibility of a providential use of foreknowledge. One of these, the so-called "Doxastic Problem," owes its origin to an apparent conflict between decision and prescience, that is, between the claim that an agent might antecedently know what it will choose and the principle,

(DP) It is impossible to hold the belief that p while deciding to bring it about that p .

Thus, if God is omniscient or, at least omniprescient, then, by (DP), God cannot decide to bring about anything and, hence, never makes providential use of His foreknowledge.¹

Hunt correctly notes that (DP) is plausible only with respect to *accessed* beliefs, presumably, to beliefs either consciously held or to which the subject has immediate conscious access. If divine knowledge of the future is unaccessed, there is no Doxastic Problem for divine providence. But Hunt remains uncomfortable with (DP), and questions its defense by means of the further principle that deciding presupposes believing that the future is open, more exactly,

(DO) If at t_1 S decides to do action A , then at some time t_2 appropriately prior to t_1 , S believes that it is yet open for him/her to A .²

While not contesting this principle, Hunt argues that a belief about what one *will* do does not imply a belief about what one *must* do, and hence, antecedent doxastic commitment does not preclude belief in an open future.

To illustrate, Hunt supposes that a young lady, Sally, faces a choice between marrying Lester or marrying Chester. Informed by a fortune-teller that she will marry Chester, Sally's natural credulity inclines her to believe what she is told. However, she "has no grounds for supposing that she *must* marry Chester, or that she *can't* pursue another course of action," [p. 410] and to that extent, she retains a sense of openness with respect to marrying Chester. Torn between Lester and Chester, she might even try to make her decision through a coin toss; heads it's Lester, tails it's Chester. Writes Hunt,

She flips the coin, believing that it will come up tails (as entailed by her choice of decision-procedure together with her credence in the fortune-teller's prediction). Note that, if the coin *were* to come up heads, she would decide in favor of Lester. Thus, the decision procedure is not merely "idling." [pp. 410-11]

The upshot is that Sally might face an open future and utilize a decision procedure while retaining her belief about what her eventual choice will be. Hence, (DP) is false.

This solution to the Doxastic Problem is unconvincing, though Hunt is correct to object to (DP). This principle is false as it stands since an agent *S* might believe that *p* will be true no matter what, yet still deliberate whether he himself will be the agent who brings about *p* rather than someone else whom he believes would bring about *p* if he didn't. A more plausible principle is this:

(DP*) It is impossible for a rational, self-reflective agent to consciously entertain the belief that he/she will perform an action *A* while, at the same time, deliberating about whether to perform *A*.

The case for this weaker principle rests upon (DO) and the following reflections about what it is to believe a course of action to be open.

To have a sense of openness about a course of action *A* one must presume that one both can perform *A* and can refrain from *A*-ing, thus, (i) that one would *A* or not depending on how one decides, and (ii) that one's decision about *A*-ing, whatever it might be, is yet *contingent*. This modality is not a mere logical or nomological contingency; there are too many things one recognizes to be logically or nomologically possible which are nevertheless ruled out by prevailing circumstances. Instead, an agent takes a course of action to be open only by assuming that both it and its complement are possible given circumstances as they now stand, in which case the contingency is a concrete or *relative* modality.³

I have argued elsewhere that the qualifier 'circumstances as they now stand' occurs inside attitudinal scope and captures minimally, what a suitably rational and self-reflective agent takes himself to believe. In this context, an agent is suitably rational only if its accessed beliefs are both consistent and closed with respect to acknowledged consequence, and suitably self-reflec-

tive if it is cognizant of what these accessed beliefs are. By definition, an omniscient being is suitably rational and self-reflective.⁴ Taking the relativization on contingency to occur internally squares nicely with the response of the cautious deliberator who, when asked if he is able to take any of the considered alternatives, reports; 'Yes I can, as far as I can tell.' Indexing 'open' in this way, a suitably rational and self-reflective agent who already believes that he will do *A* takes the future to be "fixed" or "settled" with respect to his *A*-ing, not "open." Obviously, he cannot then take his *A*-ing to be contingent relative to what he himself then believes.

This strategy treats 'believes' as expressing firm commitment, not merely a supposition that a proposition is likely. Of course, our future-directed doxastic states are typically probabilistic, less than firm, because we are well aware of our incomplete grasp of the course of events. Moreover, we commonly use 'believes' to express such less-than-firm commitments. But for an omniscient being, the ascriptive use of 'believes' to indicate the more restrictive firm commitment is unquestionably appropriate; probability is not *its* guide to life, however prevalent it is for us. Here, then, is the rationale for (DP*).

Returning to Sally's case, if she is suitable self-reflective while consciously believing that she will marry Chester, then *relative to* what she takes herself to believe, marrying Chester is part of the fixed future and she no longer presumes it is open for her to do otherwise. *Were* she to think it is still open what she will do, she would allow that it is yet possible, given all that she takes herself to believe, that she marry Lester instead, but then she wouldn't have an accessed belief that she will marry Chester. *Believing* that she will marry Chester, by contrast, Sally could not be using the coin toss *in order to* decide whether to marry him; that matter is settled, even though her perceiving the coin to come up heads might cause her to change her mind and marry Lester instead. If she did utilize the coin toss *as* a decision procedure then, by the reasoning used to motivate (DP*), it would be a simple misnomer to describe Sally as "deliberating" about whom to marry while consciously "believing" that she will marry Chester.

In "Can God Make Up His Mind?," however, my argument against the possibility of an omniscient decider is not based upon (DP*), rather, upon (DO). Consider; as an omniscient being, God is both rational and self-reflective. Assuming that for each action-type *A* and times *t*₁ and *t*₂, it is either true at *t*₁ that God will *A* at *t*₂ or it is true at *t*₁ that God will refrain from *A*-ing at *t*₂, then God never possesses the required sense of openness regarding his *A*-ing. If, by contrast, God were to decide whether or not to *A* then, by (DO), he would antecedently assume that his *A*-ing is open, and if so, there would be a time during which God realized that his *A*-ing is contingent relative to what he then believes. But since God believes all and only truths, and given

that (i) either it is true that he will A or that he will refrain from A-ing, and (ii) God is suitably rational and self-reflective, then God either believes that he will A or believes that he will refrain from A-ing. Hence, God could never believe that his A-ing is contingent with respect to what he believes. Therefore, God can neither deliberate nor choose, nor—as I have subsequently argued—act intentionally.⁵

Hunt does not confront this reasoning squarely. Instead, he criticizes the reasoning I employed in responding to Quinn's attempt to show how decision and foreknowledge could be combined.⁶ My position, Hunt contends, implies that all our decisions are either criterionless or decisions about which decision procedures to use; e.g., to take an umbrella if it looks like rain, etc. Thus, he writes,

If Kapitan's analysis is correct I do not *decide* anything as I pass the umbrella rack on my way to the door—I merely implement a decision that I made a long time ago when I chose a certain criterion, a criterion which now happens to be satisfied. [p. 411]

Hunt finds it implausible that one who accepts the conditional decision-procedure does not make any further decision on the way out the door, *viz.*, to take the umbrella:

That means that the only genuine decisions—or at least the only decisions the Doxastic Principle should be construed as governing—are criterionless. This is itself a *reductio* of Kapitan's argument; alternatively, it is proof that the Doxastic Principle is not a principle governing all decisions, but only a special class of decisions. [p. 411]

Since there is no reason to suppose that God makes only the criterionless decisions covered by (DP), Hunt concludes that God's providential governance is not jeopardized by His complete foreknowledge.

These conclusions are unwarranted. To adopt a decision procedure is one decision; to utilize that procedure in helping one to make upon one's mind about which course of action to pursue is a process which terminates in a distinct decision. When I decided to adopt the umbrella criterion, for example, I endorsed the conditional: to take the umbrella if it is raining or about to rain. Merely endorsing this intention is never *sufficient* for my taking an umbrella on any given occasion, nor for the distinct intending to take the umbrella. I must first determine whether it is raining or about to (say, by looking outside or reading the weather report). When I come to believe that it is raining now or about to, I thereby acquire the distinct intention to take the umbrella, though the effect of my having previously adopted the conditional intention makes this acquisition relatively automatic, eliminating the necessity for deliberation. But a distinct intending it is nevertheless, and before I acquired it I did not know that I would take the umbrella; at best I knew that I would take the umbrella if it is raining or about to. Therefore,

Hunt is wrong to describe the situation as he does and to hold that my position is committed to claiming that all decisions are criterionless or choices of which decision-procedures to follow.

If I am correct, Hunt's closing attempt to salvage the providential use of foreknowledge comes to naught. In his brief description of the interplay between criteria and decisions in divine decision-making, he speaks as though God undergoes a temporal process of coming to know and coming to intend:

He can draw on His knowledge of the actual world to determine which of these conditionals have true antecedents. Only then does He decide what response to make, and this response always follows the criteria He has adopted (since there could be no occasion for God to change His mind about these). [p. 412]

This very description presents a picture of God as "making up His mind" in the course of time, and were such a description accurate then we could only conclude that at some earlier stages God's mind was not yet made up. Deliberation, decision, coming to intend, can only be processes which endeavor to settle what is previously unsettled. If God undergoes such processes, then by (DO), there is some antecedent time during which God has a sense of openness with respect to the courses of action under consideration. If so, God presumed that his performing any of these alternatives were as yet contingent with respect to what he took himself to believe. But he could not then have believed of any of the alternatives that he would perform it and, hence, he could not have known what his future decision would be.

I conclude that Hunt's attempt to remove the threat to the providential use of foreknowledge posed by the Doxastic Problem fails. Accepting either (DP*) or (DO), we must acknowledge that the merger of choice with omniscience remains precarious.

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NOTES

1. This sort of argument is developed in Richard La Croix, "Omniprescience and Divine Determinism," *Religious Studies* 12 (1976), pp. 365-81. The argument is disputed in Philip Quinn, "Divine Foreknowledge and Divine Freedom," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 9 (1978), pp. 219-40, but in "Can God Make Up His Mind?" *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 15 (1984), pp. 37-47, I defend La Croix's conclusion by means of a different argument. Hunt addresses the latter in section IV of his paper.

2. Principle (DO) does not appear, as such, in my "Can God Make Up His Mind?," though it is a consequence of the argumentation presented in pp. 40-44 of that essay.

3. A proposition P is contingent relative to a set S just in case neither P nor not-P is a consequence of S. In relation to the issue of free will, relative modality has been discussed by several, including A. E. Falk, "Some Modal Confusions in Compatibilism," *American*

Philosophical Quarterly 18 (1981), pp. 141-48; M. Slote, "Selective Necessity and Free Will," *Journal of Philosophy* 77 (1982), pp. 136-51; and T. Kapitan, "Doxastic Freedom: A Compatibilist Alternative," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 26 (1989), pp. 31-42.

4. I argue for this implication in "Agency and Omniscience," *Religious Studies* 27 (1991), pp. 105-20. See also my "Deliberation and the Presumption of Open Alternatives," *The Philosophical Quarterly* 36 (1986), pp. 230-51.

5. Concerning the first disjunct, see "Can God Make Up His Mind?" The second is defended in "Agency and Omniscience" and, again, in "Action, Uncertainty, and Divine Impotence," *Analysis* 50 (1990), pp. 127-33. In "Doxastic Freedom: A Compatibilist Alternative" it is argued that in the presumption of contingency, the quantification over one's beliefs must be over the totality of what one takes oneself to believe, not just over those that are accessed, even if one's presumption is mistaken. If so, one cannot locate the contingency needed for divine action in what is or is not included in God's accessed beliefs.

6. See Quinn, *op. cit.*, and my response to Quinn in "Can God Make Up His Mind?" especially, pp. 38-39.