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David Basinger

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SIMPLE FOREKNOWLEDGE AND PROVIDENTIAL CONTROL: A RESPONSE TO HUNT

David Basinger

It has become quite popular recently to maintain that a God who possessed simple foreknowledge—knowledge of what has happened, is happening and will actually happen—would have absolutely no greater providential control over earthly affairs than a God who possessed no foreknowledge at all.

In an article in this journal, David P. Hunt disputes this claim, arguing that it is at least true that it is possible for *complete* foreknowledge to contribute to *more* providential control than would be available with *no* foreknowledge. I argue that while Hunt's strategy—which is to place divine decision-making before creation and make it hypothetical—is ingenious, it ultimately fails.

It has become popular recently to maintain that a God with Simple Foreknowledge—a God who knows all that has happened, is happening and *will* happen in the actual world—has *absolutely no* greater providential control over earthly affairs than a God with only Present Knowledge—a God who knows only what has happened and is happening in the actual world.¹

David P. Hunt disputes this claim, arguing that, at the very least, the following is true:

ST: It is possible for *complete* foreknowledge to contribute to *more* providential control than would be available with *no* foreknowledge (p. 405).

Hunt realizes that to substantiate this contention, he must overcome two obstacles. First, there is a metaphysical problem. If God possesses Simple Foreknowledge (SFK), then he always knows what will happen as the result of his decisions before these decisions are made. But if we assume that God makes his decisions on the basis of all the relevant data available to him, then God is in the position of making his decisions at least in part on the basis of his knowledge of what the results of his decisions will be. And decision-making of this type, Hunt acknowledges, may well be a metaphysical impossibility.

Second, there is a doxastic problem. If God has complete SFK, then he also knows, of course, what his decisions will be before they are made. But to make a decision, Hunt acknowledges, is to consider at least two possible options and choose between them. And even God, Hunt grants, is not free to

choose between options *if* he already knows which option he is going to choose.

Hunt's solution to these problems is to separate God's decision-making from his knowledge of the actual world. Let us assume, he begins, that independently of his knowledge of the actual world, God formulates conditional "judgments about what it would be best for Him to do in response to every possible set of conditions He might encounter." That is, let us assume that for every possible set of conditions, God forms judgments of the following type: If X obtains, then it would be best to do Y.

If God has only Present Knowledge (PK), Hunt points out, then all of these conditional decisions will have antecedent conditions that are temporally prior to the actions referred to in the consequents. But if God has SFK, then some of these decisions "will be such that the conditions set forth in their antecedents are temporally later than the actions referred to in their consequents." Moreover, Hunt continues, to be able to respond to certain conditions *before* they actually obtain obviously "allows God to undertake providential interventions that would not otherwise have been feasible." Furthermore, since such interventions are in this case simply the implementation of conditional decisions made independently "of any knowledge God might have of the actual world," both the standard doxastic and metaphysical challenges are avoided. And accordingly, he concludes, if we assume that God's providential activity is based on conditional decisions of this type, then we can justifiably maintain that ST is true—that a God with SFK might in some cases have a providential edge over a God with only PK (pp. 412).

Hunt doesn't explain exactly how God can form these conditional decisions independently of "any knowledge [He] might have of the actual world," or exactly how such decisions will increase providential control. But it seems to me that something like the following is the strongest reading of his position.

Let us assume that before creation—and thus before God knew (logically speaking) what would occur in the actual world—God formulated for every possible set of conditions X a conditional decision of the following type: *if X obtains, I will do Y because I desire to bring about Z.*

Many of these conditionals will describe what God will do at time t2 if X occurs at time t1. But since God possesses foreknowledge in any world he initiates, some of these conditionals will describe what God will do at t1 if he *foresees* that X will occur at t2. That is, some will be of the following form: If I know (possibly among other things) at time t1 that X will occur at time t2, then I will do Y at time t1 because I desire to bring about Z.

But even for conditional decisions of this type, what must be emphasized is that at the logical point in time at which God formulated such decisions, no knowledge of the actual world was yet involved. Only after his creative decision—only after he decided which actualizable world to initiate—did he

see all that would actually occur in our world, including those antecedent conditions that would be actualized and, thus, exactly what he would be doing in response.

However, if this is the basis for God's activity in our world, then the doxastic and metaphysical problems no longer arise. Although it is still the case that God knows before he does anything in our world exactly what he will be doing and what will occur as the result, the decisions that are determining his actions were made before he had access to this information.

Yet it can still be argued that foreknowledge gives God a providential edge since those conditional decisions that include knowledge of future events in the antecedent conditions can still justifiably be said to trigger the implementation of efficacious divine activity that would otherwise not have occurred.

I am willing to grant that by placing the actual decision-making process prior to creation, the standard doxastic and metaphysical problems can be circumvented. But it seems to me that other related problems still plague Hunt's 'conditional decision' model and thus render it unable to establish that SFK can increase God's control over earthly affairs.

The best way to initiate a discussion of these problems, I believe, is to consider a test case. Let us imagine that a young man named Tom asks a young woman named Sue to marry him and that Sue comes to God in prayer for advice. Moreover, let's assume that among the beliefs that God holds as he considers this request is the belief that Sue will respond very negatively if her spouse dies a tragic death soon after marriage and, thus, that she ought not be encouraged to marry if it is known or believed justifiably that such a death will occur. And, finally, let us assume that while, if God possessed only PK, he would have no reason to think Tom will die in the near future and thus would encourage Sue to accept the proposal on the basis of the information available, God is in fact going to attempt to convince Sue to reject the proposal because he possesses SFK and foresees that Tom is going to die in a horrible automobile accident a year from now.

It might appear that we here have a clear case in which foreknowledge contributes "to more providential control than would be available with no foreknowledge." Even if God did not possess SFK, he would believe that the imminent death of Tom would make the marriage unwise. But it is only because he possesses SFK, it seems, that he is in a position to see that Tom will die in the auto accident and thus in a position to offer Sue the best advice.

If we assume that God's response to Sue—his attempt to convince her not to accept Tom's proposal—is the implementation of a conditional decision made before creation, the crucial question for our purpose is clear: What exactly is the conditional decision that is triggering the divine activity in this case? Since what is allegedly initiating God's response to Sue is his *belief* that Sue ought not marry someone who will die soon after marriage and his

foreknowledge of the fact that Tom is going to die in a year, it might appear that the relevant conditional in this case is the following:

D1: I have decided (without knowing what will actually occur) that if Sue asks me whether she should marry Tom and I not only believe that it will be best for Sue not to marry someone who will die tragically soon after their marriage but also know that Tom will die in an automobile accident a year from now, then I will attempt to convince Sue to reject Tom's proposal because I want what is best for Sue.

But in any world W in which Sue asks God whether she should marry Tom and God foreknows that Tom will die tragically in a year, a God with *complete* foreknowledge also foreknows not only how he will respond to Sue's request in W but whether what is best for Sue will or will not come about. Thus, if we assume that when God made his conditional decisions before creation, he included in the antecedent conditions all the relevant information to which he would have access at the time they were implemented, then it appears that we must replace D1 with some instantiation of the following conditional pattern:

D2: I have decided (without knowing what will actually occur) that if Sue asks me whether she should marry Tom and I know that Tom will die in an automobile accident a year from now and *that I will attempt to convince Sue to reject Tom's proposal and that what is best for her will (or will not) come about*, then I will attempt to convince Sue to reject Tom's proposal because I want what is best for Sue.

But D2 is problematic on two counts. First, as has already been stated, to say that God has *decided* to do X under certain conditions is to say that God could also have *decided* not to do X under exactly the same conditions. Applied to D2, this means that if God actually *decided* before creation that he would attempt to influence Sue to reject Tom's proposal if he were to encounter the antecedent conditions stipulated in D2, then he could also have *decided* before creation that he would *not* attempt to discourage the marriage under these very same conditions.

However, God could not have made *this* decision under the conditions in question because these conditions include God's knowledge of the fact that he *will* attempt to influence Sue to reject Tom's proposal, and even God is not free to do what he knows he will not do. But if God could *not* have decided *not to* discourage the marriage under the conditions in question, then it cannot be the case, as D2 stipulates, that God *decided* to discourage the marriage if he encountered these conditions. Given the conditions stated in D2, there is simply no decision to be made.

Moreover, an analogous problem would obviously surface with respect to any variant of D2 whose antecedent included foreknowledge of what God will in fact decide to do.

Second, to include God's knowledge of what will or will not happen to Sue in the antecedent conditions of D2 also generates difficulties. If we assume that the antecedent conditions that are to trigger God's activity include his knowledge of the fact that his desired end—what is best for Sue—*will not* come about, then it obviously cannot be said that these antecedent conditions—even if they also include God's foreknowledge of the fact that Tom is going to die—can trigger divine activity that will *increase* God's ability to bring about that which he desires to come about in this case. And if we assume that these antecedent conditions include God's knowledge of the fact that what is best for Sue *will* come about, then again it cannot be said that these antecedent conditions can trigger divine activity that will *increase* God's ability to bring about what he desires, for in this case we are already assured that what is best for Sue will actually occur *regardless* of the type of activity D2 directs God to implement.

Moreover, analogous problems would plague any variant of D2 that incorporated in the antecedent conditions foreknowledge of the fact that God's desired ends will (or will not) occur.

But what if we assume, as does Hunt, that when formulating his conditional decisions, God was not required to take into consideration all the relevant data that would be available to him when these decisions were implemented (pp. 404-408)? Specifically, what if we *remove* totally from the antecedent conditions God's knowledge of how he is going to respond to Sue and *replace* his knowledge of what is going to happen to Sue with a *justified belief* about what will quite probably come about if she refuses Tom's proposal? We are then left with the following modification of D1:

D3: I have decided (without knowing what will actually occur) that if Sue asks me whether she should marry Tom and I know that Tom will die in an automobile accident a year from now and I justifiably believe that, if Sue refuses Tom's proposal, it is quite probable that what is best for Sue will come about, then I will encourage Sue to reject Tom's proposal because I want what is best for Sue.

But D3 also offers no support for ST. Even if we continue to grant that God's response to Sue's request could justifiably be triggered by antecedent conditions that do not include all that God would know about Tom and Sue at the time of this response, it still remains true that in any world W in which Sue asks God at time t1 whether she should marry Tom, a God with SFK will know (among other things) at t1 in W (1) whether Sue will refuse or accept Tom's proposal and (2) whether what is best for Sue will or will not come about as a result.

Let us assume first that what God knows in W is that Sue will *refuse* Tom's proposal and that what is best for her *will* come about as a result. In this case, God cannot believe in W that it is quite *probable* that what is best for Sue

will come about if she refuses Tom's proposal. For to believe that something will quite *probably* come about—as opposed to knowing with certainty that it will come about—is to acknowledge that it is *possible* that it might not come about. But if God *knows* in W that Sue will in fact refuse Tom's proposal and that it *will* in fact be best that she did, then God cannot simultaneously believe in W that it is even possible that what is best for Sue *might not* in fact come about if the proposal is refused.

Moreover, an even more serious problem of this type arises if we assume that what God knows in W is that Sue will *refuse* Tom's proposal but that what is best for Sue *will not* in fact come about as a result. Not even God can believe that something is the case if he knows that it is not the case. Thus, if God does in fact know in W that what is best for Sue will not in fact come about if she refuses Tom's proposal, then he again cannot at the same time believe that it is quite probable that what is best for Sue will in fact come about if she refuses the proposal. And, of course, if God cannot hold this belief about Sue in W, then the antecedent conditions noted in D3 can never be fully satisfied in W, and D3, accordingly, can never trigger providentially efficacious divine behavior in W.

But what if God knows in W that Sue will *not refuse* Tom's proposal and that what is best for Sue *will* occur as a result? Or what if God knows in W that Sue *will not* refuse Tom's proposal and that what is best *will not* occur as a result? In either case, God could in W still justifiably continue to believe *counterfactually* that, if Sue were to refuse Tom's proposal, it is quite probable that what is best for Sue would come about. But a belief about what would happen if Sue were to reject Tom's proposal gives God absolutely no information about how Sue will (or even will probably) respond to Tom's death in a world in which she does *accept* Tom's proposal, and thus the implementation of D3 in W under these conditions could in no sense increase the likelihood that what God desires to bring about—namely, that Sue respond to Tom's death in the best manner possible—will in fact come about in W.

Nor, of course, will it help to exclude even *beliefs* about how Sue will respond to Tom's death from the antecedent conditions, for if there is nothing in the antecedent conditions of God's decision that indicates how Sue will respond to Tom's death if she accepts or rejects his proposal, then again the implementation of such a decision can in no sense increase God's ability to bring about his desired end.

Other scenarios could be considered, but we are now in a position to see why Hunt's 'conditional decision' model is flawed in principle. I see no reason to deny that a God with SFK could have decided before creation how he would respond if certain conditions were to obtain. But when we attempt to identify what must be included in the antecedent conditions of such conditionals if their implementation is to increase God's providential control—to

establish ST—we find ourselves in an inescapable dilemma. We cannot allow God's knowledge of what he is going to decide to do to be included, for then no decision is actually possible. Nor can we allow the fact that the desired ends will come about to be included, for then we are already assured that what God wants to occur will occur regardless of what God does in response. And we cannot allow beliefs about whether God's desired ends will probably come about under certain circumstances to be included for, given that God possesses complete SFK, such beliefs will either be impossible for God to hold or counterfactual in a manner that renders them void of providential efficacy.

But if we do not allow the antecedent conditions of such conditionals to include *any* indication of the circumstances under which God's desired ends are likely to occur, then the implementation of the consequents of these conditionals can in no sense increase the likelihood that God will achieve his desired ends—can in no sense increase God's providential control.

So I still stand by what I and others have argued: a God with simple foreknowledge has no greater providential control over the world than does a God with only PK. At least I do not see that Hunt has given us a good reason to believe otherwise.

Roberts Wesleyan College

NOTE

1. See, for example, David Basinger, "Middle Knowledge and Classical Christian Thought," *Religious Studies* 22 (1986), pp. 407-22; William Hasker, *God, Time and Knowledge* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), pp. 51-63.