Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers

Volume 29 | Issue 4

Article 7

10-1-2012

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Recommended Citation

Hasker, William (2012) "The Present is Necessary! Rejoinder to Rota," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 29 : Iss. 4 , Article 7.

DOI: 10.5840/faithphil201229447

Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol29/iss4/7>

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THE PRESENT IS NECESSARY! REJOINDER TO ROTA

William Hasker

My account of free will entails that events of the present moment are “necessary” in the same way that the past is necessary. I argue that Michael Rota’s main objection to this account is unsuccessful. I also argue that Rota’s synchronous account of contingency is inferior to the diachronic account which I favor.

Once again, I must thank Michael Rota for his close attention to my work. In this second critique,¹ he is working mainly with a brief, and somewhat informal, statement of mine, and it is not unexpected that refinements are needed as further complications are introduced. He does his best to make the required modifications, and to a large extent he is successful in doing so. In the end, we do part company. Here are some key statements of mine, as quoted by Rota:

(FW) N is free at T with respect to performing A =_{df} It is in N’s power at T to perform A, and it is in N’s power at T to refrain from performing A.

(P₂) In general, if it is in N’s power at T to perform A, then there is nothing in the circumstances that obtain at T which *prevents* or *precludes* N’s performing A.

Also the following, drawing on a quotation from Suarez:

According to the philosophers [Suarez] cites, the will is not free in the sense of (FW) at the very instant at which it is acting. However, these philosophers mention two other ways in which the will may very well be free at that instant, namely, “the sense that (i) the act proceeds from the freedom and indifference that the will had immediately before that instant or in the sense that (ii) at the instant in question the will has the power to desist from the act in the time immediately following that instant.” These two alternatives (or the combination of the two) specify, I want to say, what is properly *meant* by saying that the act in question is a free act.

Now, a little consideration will reveal that the alternatives (i) and (ii) in the quotation from Suarez actually pertain to slightly *different* acts on the part of the agent. (i) is relevant to the act *now being performed* by the agent,

¹Michael Rota, “Freedom and the Necessity of the Present: A Reply to William Hasker,” *Faith and Philosophy* 29:4 (this issue). See this reply for references to earlier stages in the discussion.

whereas (ii) is relevant to the *continuation or non-continuation* of that act in the immediate future. If this difference is not attended to, trouble results, as Rota shows in his critique. Eventually, however, this gets sorted out, and he arrives at the two principles,

- (Q₃) Where a human agent N performs an act A at a time T, the act A is free iff immediately before T, it was in N's power to perform A at T, and immediately before T it was in N's power to refrain from performing A at T,

and

- (Q₃*) Where a human agent N refrains from performing an act A at a time T, the omission ~A is free iff immediately before T, it was in N's power to perform A at T, and immediately before T it was in N's power to refrain from performing A at T.

I am happy to accept these two propositions as correctly derived from my position.

Next, Rota introduces a difficulty concerning timing. Suppose I am riding on a subway train, between stops. It was not in my power "immediately before" the present instant to refrain from riding on the train; there's no way off the train between stops. This would lead, given (Q₃), to the erroneous conclusion that my riding is not free, when in fact it is. Now, my own tendency would be to address this by relaxing slightly the "immediately before" requirement, and saying that my riding is free if a few minutes ago, when I was about to board the train, it was in my power not to do so. Rota, however, has a different solution. Following Suarez and some other medievals, he introduces a distinction between the "commanded action"—an ordinary action such as riding on a subway train, which takes time to be completed—and the "act of will," the act in which the will instantaneously "commands" or instigates the ordinary action in question. (In his example the act of will does this by controlling the state of the electron *e*.) It will then be the act of will that is free in the primary sense; the commanded action is free in a derivative sense, because it results from a free act of will. In view of this, he offers two principles which tell us whether an act of will is free:

- (Q₄) Where a human agent N performs an act of will α at a time T, the act is free iff immediately before T, it was in N's power to perform α at T, and immediately before T it was in N's power to refrain from performing α at T,

and

- (Q₄*) Where a human agent N refrains from performing an act of will α at a time T, the omission $\sim \alpha$ is free iff immediately before T, it was in N's power to perform α at T, and immediately before T it was in N's power to refrain from performing α at T.

The distinction between acts of will and commanded acts is a useful one, if it is carefully employed. And while I doubt that anything done by human

beings is truly instantaneous, I will go along for now with the assumption that this is true of acts of will. One point to notice, for future reference, is that acts of will are by definition causally efficacious; the act of will controls the "state of the agent's will," represented here by the state of the electron *e*. Given this, I can tentatively accept (Q_4) and (Q_4^*) as formulating my view.

Now, however, Rota introduces his counterexample. Suppose I am considering whether or not to perform some act of will α —say, the act that would initiate my getting onto the subway car. At a certain instant before I have made my decision, God (who has made up his own mind only at that instant²), intervenes and puts my brain in the state that will lead to my not getting on the subway. According to Rota, the definiens for (Q_4^*) is satisfied, and (Q_4^*) implies that my failure to perform α is free. But clearly, it is *not* free, so (Q_4^*) is falsified.

This is too quick. (Q_4^*) applies only when an agent *refrains* from performing an act of will, so we need to consider what is involved in "refraining." In order to be free with respect to performing α , there must be alternatives that are within the agent's power. Notice, however, that for the most part (and possibly always³) these alternatives will consist of *other acts of will* that might be performed instead, rather than the alternative of performing no act of will at all. (Instead of performing the act of will that would initiate my getting on the subway, I may perform the act that would initiate my leaving the platform, or the act that would initiate my staying right where I am, waiting for the next train.⁴) But in Rota's example there *is no* act of will that I perform at T; God, by intervening, has assumed control of the state of my will, and whatever may be going on in my mind, it is not a causally efficacious "act of will" such as would be required if I were to refrain from performing α at T. So I do not *refrain* from performing α ; rather I am *prevented by God* from doing this. (Q_4^*) does not apply, and the principle emerges unscathed.

It might occur to us that the problem here is merely linguistic, arising from the implications of the word "refrains." Perhaps, then, we can save the counterexample by formulating a principle which avoids that word, for instance:

($Q_4!$) Where a human agent N does not perform an act of will α at a time T, the non-performance of α is free iff immediately before T, it was in N's power to perform α at T, and immediately before T it was in N's power to refrain from performing α at T.

²This is necessary, since if God had all along a settled intention to intervene, this would preclude my performing an "act of will" in the situation and would negate my freedom.

³The possible exception is a state of "quiescence of will," in which the agent abstains from willing *anything at all* for a period of time. This may be the goal in some meditation disciplines, for instance that of Zen Buddhism. We would then have the paradoxical situation of a state of "willed non-willing." I will not pursue this possibility further here.

⁴Note Rota's statement, in his Reply, that "When N performs an act of will, N's will takes on (or remains in) a certain state" (emphasis added).

($Q_4!$), I admit, does not escape from Rota's counterexample. But ($Q_4!$) is false in any case, so there is no need for me to defend it. The problem with ($Q_4!$) is that the relevant notion of freedom applies only in cases involving at least some degree of *intention* on the part of the agent, but no such intention is required by ($Q_4!$). To see this, think of some situation in which you can see, in retrospect, that there was something you might have done in that situation, something that might have had a desirable result of some sort. At the time, however, it "never entered your mind" that you might act in that way; it simply wasn't something you in any way considered. It would, I submit, be entirely inappropriate to describe your not performing that action as "free" or "voluntary." And because of this, the hope of saving the counterexample by supplying an innocuous replacement for "refrains" is doomed to failure. If the replacement term implies an intentional act (or an intentional "non-act") on the part of the agent that results in a particular brain-state, the principle will not apply to Rota's example; if it does not, the principle will be false anyway and need not be defended. I conclude that Rota's attempt to craft a counterexample to my account of free action is unsuccessful.

The remaining disagreement between us concerns the "diachronic vs. synchronic" accounts of contingency and of powers. Here the issue concerns the "act of will" by which N instantaneously causes his will to be in the relevant state for bringing about some "commanded act." Prior to time T (assumed to be a point-instant), N has both the power to perform the act of will in question and the power to refrain from performing it. After T, however, N no longer has the power to refrain from performing the act, since he has already performed it. Now, the question Rota is raising is, does N have this power *at T*, or does he not? And this is indeed a question to which we give different answers. Rota, on the basis of my previous statements, assumes I will reject

- (7) For some human agent N, some act A, and some time T, N performs A at T, and N is free at T with respect to performing A,

and will affirm

- (11) For any human agent N who performs an act A at some time T, N is not free at T with respect to doing A at T.

It should be noted, however, that in my previous discussion of (7) and (11) the act A was assumed to be, in our present terminology, a "commanded act," an ordinary action which takes time to complete. However, we are now speaking of "acts of will," which are instantaneous. And when the question concerns acts of will, my answer is that the question as Rota frames it has no answer; it is an improper question. Consider a parallel example. There is on some piece of land a concrete wall, made up of straight segments. At C there is a corner, at which the wall changes direction. You ask me, "What is the direction of the wall at C?" I answer, "Before C the wall is going east northeast, but after C it is going straight

east." You, however, are not satisfied: you ask, impatiently, "Yes, but what is the direction of the wall *at C*?" And now I must reply that your question has no answer. The "direction of a wall at a point" means, and can only mean, the direction of a segment of the wall that includes that point. If the direction changes discontinuously at the point in question, the only possible answer is to give the (different) directions taken by the wall on each side of the point. If that is not what is wanted, then no answer is possible.

And now for Rota's question about N's power at T, with respect to refraining from the act of will α , the act which he performs at T. My answer is that up until T he has the power to refrain, and thereafter he lacks that power. If you aren't satisfied by that, no further answer is possible, any more than it is possible to specify the direction of the wall at C. The expression, 'the power N has at T' simply does not refer to anything. That is all there is to it.

Rota, however, has a different answer. According to him (following Suarez, etc.), N *both* has the power at T to refrain, and *also* lacks that power. That is, he *has* the power at the earlier "instant of nature" at which he has not yet made his decision, and he *lacks* the power at that later instant of nature at which he has already made the decision, *both* instants of nature being temporally simultaneous with T.

Now, I am not in general averse to distinguishing between the order of explanation and the temporal order; I believe that we do sometimes have to make this distinction. I am not, however, convinced of the usefulness of the distinction in this particular case. My account is considerably simpler than Rota's, so it would seem to be incumbent on him to justify adding what may seem to be unnecessary complications. Furthermore, his account entails the apparently contradictory claim that, at T, the agent both has the power and lacks the power to refrain from the act of will in question (viz., the act performed at T). Rota's solution to this is that "Statements of the form 'N has at T the power to perform α at T' and 'N has at T the power to refrain from performing α at T', and their negations, are incomplete, and need to be indexed to instants of nature."⁵ In view of this, we have, for instance,

- (X) For some human agent N, some act of will α , and some time T, N performs α at T, and it is N's power at T in the earlier instant of nature to refrain from performing α ,

and

- (Y) For any human agent N who performs an act of will α at some time T, it is not in N's power at T in the later instant of nature to refrain from performing α .

These two propositions are not formally inconsistent. It is not clear, however, that we have made any progress with the underlying problem: How

⁵In an e-mail.

can a single substance, N, be in both of two contradictory states simultaneously—that is, in the same instant of time? We may ask, furthermore, where are the truth-makers for (X) and (Y), that account for the difference between them? Since acts of will are wholly interior to the agent, one might think that the truth-makers for such statements must be found in some state of the agent. But there is *absolutely no difference* in the state of the agent N in the two instants of nature; both instants of nature are contained in the single, indivisible point-instant T. Nor does N have “parts” such that (X) could be true of one part and (Y) true of another part. And no other solution to the truth-maker problem seems to be available. These truths, we must conclude, do not “supervene upon being.”

Finally, a brief comment about proof, and the burden of proof. Rota describes me as offering a “proof” of theological incompatibilism, and he considers that he has dealt my attempt a heavy blow by arguing that one or more of my premises are “dubious.” I have attempted to rebut his specific arguments against those premises. But insofar as a proof is an argument which should compel the assent of any reasonable and well-informed person, I make no claim to have “proved” theological incompatibilism. Like many other philosophers, I have reluctantly concluded that proof in this sense is rarely if ever available for significant philosophical positions. I am content if I have presented an argument which seems to me to be clearly correct, and whose premises are at least as plausible (I would hope, more plausible) than the premises of arguments for opposing views. With regard to the opposition between diachronic and synchronic accounts of powers, I believe my diachronic account is superior to Rota’s synchronic account in several ways. It is clearly simpler, and also more readily comprehensible. (Consider the propositions (X) and (Y), which are essential for his view.) Furthermore, it is superior with regard to coherence, both internal and external. Internally, it is far from clear that the conjunction of (X) and (Y) is consistent. As for external coherence, his view conflicts with the widely accepted principle that “truth supervenes upon being,” whereas mine does not. On the other hand, his synchronic view may make it easier to defend theological doctrines which are dearly cherished by some thinkers. So full agreement is unlikely, but I do want to express my appreciation to Rota for his illuminating and very helpful discussion.

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