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THEOLOGICAL INCOMPATIBILISM AND THE NECESSITY OF THE PRESENT: A RESPONSE TO MICHAEL ROTA

William Hasker

Michael Rota has identified a problem in my argument for theological incompatibilism, and claims that it also undermines my argument against divine timeless knowledge. I acknowledge the problem, but show that it is easily corrected and leaves my arguments unscathed.

I want to begin by thanking Michael Rota for his close examination of my argument for theological incompatibilism.¹ His article provides the occasion for a small but important correction on my part, and also enables me to clarify some issues. Once the needed correction is made, however, his arguments do not pose any fundamental difficulty for my position.

He begins his discussion by identifying—correctly, I must admit—an inconsistency in what I said on this topic in *God, Time, and Knowledge*.² Here is how the inconsistency arises: My definition of free will is as follows:

(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.³

In explicating this definition, I affirm what I will term Proposition (P):

(P) 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 **at T**.⁴

But this leads to trouble. For if N performs A at T, then it will follow, according to my definition of "hard facts," that "N performs A at T" is a hard fact at T. Now if "N performs A at T" is a hard fact at T, it is included

¹Michael Rota, "A Problem for Hasker: Freedom with Respect to the Present, Hard Facts, and Theological Incompatibilism," *Faith and Philosophy* 27.3 (July 2010): 287–305. (Page references in the text are to this article.) As will become apparent, Rota has failed to anticipate my response to his objection. For the rest, however, his treatment of my work is scrupulously accurate.

²Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989.

³*God, Time, and Knowledge*, 66; quoted on 288.

⁴*God, Time, and Knowledge*, 67; quoted on 288 (bolding added).



among the *circumstances* which obtain at T. But N's performing A at T clearly *precludes* N's refraining from performing A at T, which means that it is *not* in N's power at T to refrain from performing A at T. And this in turn means that N is *not free* with respect to performing A at T. But then, by parallel reasoning, it will follow that N is *never* free with respect to performing any action whatsoever. For at a given time T it will be true either that N is performing A or that N is refraining from performing A,⁵ but in either case N will lack the "two-way power" which, according to (FW), N must have in order to be free with respect to performing A. This, however, is inconsistent with my frequent assertions that we humans do, in fact, have free will in a great many situations.

The difficulty arises, of course, from the bolded words "**at T**," which occur in the sentence, "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 **at T**." Delete those words, and the contradiction disappears. For regardless of what N is doing at T, this need not in general either prevent or preclude N's performing A at some time subsequent (perhaps immediately subsequent) to T. So this is the correction that is required, which though small in extent is indeed crucial.

Rota goes on to restate his argument in a slightly different form, and further insight can be gained by examining this version. Here the crucial premise is

- (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. (290)

From this, once again, the contradiction follows. For if N performs A at T, the proposition "N performs A at T" will be a hard fact with respect to T and will be included among the circumstances that obtain at T. And it will follow, as before, that N lacks the two-way power that, according to (FW), is required if he is to be free at T with respect to performing A. Rota acknowledges that I have not explicitly endorsed (7), and considers the possibility that I might reject (7), affirming instead

- (10) For some human agent N, some act A, and some time T, N is free at T with respect to performing A. (290)

(10), unlike (7), does not entail that N is free with respect to performing A *at the very time when she is performing that action*, and so the contradiction is avoided. Rota proceeds to show, however, with the aid of proposition (P), that I am committed to (7) and not merely to (10), so this way out is not available to me *so long as I affirm (P)*.⁶

⁵If N is unconscious or otherwise incapacitated at T we might have scruples about saying that N is "refraining from performing A." In that case, however, it will surely not be true that N is free at T with respect to performing A.

⁶A point of clarification: To the best of my knowledge, I have never endorsed (7), nor have I ever accepted such a proposition as being true. The fact remains, however, that given other assumptions I accept, I am committed to accepting (7) so long as I affirm (P) with the inclusion of "**at T**."

Having established the contradiction, Rota proceeds to explore some possible ways of avoiding it. Among these, he devotes considerable space to the possibility of rejecting (7), affirming (10) in its place. Indeed, he provides a plausible rationale (though one he does not himself accept) for making this move:

While doing A at T, N doesn't have the power (at T) to refrain from doing A at T. For by the time T is present, N is doing A. But given this, N cannot at T exercise a power to refrain from doing A—it's just too late for that. And if N cannot exercise at T a power to refrain from doing A at T, then (given what is meant by 'power' in this discussion) N does not have at T a power to refrain from doing A at T. (291)

Furthermore, Rota quotes Suarez as attributing this very same view to several important medieval philosophers:

Ockham, Gabriel, and other nominalists teach that with respect to an act that it is already exercising, the will is not free at the very instant at which it exercises that act, except either in 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, even if all the other conditions or causes that concur for the act persist . . . The Master [Peter Lombard] seems to embrace this position in *Sentences* 2, dist. 25, chap. 2, where he says that free choice has to do not with the present or the past but with the future.⁷

I have to say that I find this reasoning entirely congenial, and I welcome the support of Ockham, Gabriel, and Peter Lombard for what seems to me to be to be evidently the right way to think about this matter. Perhaps a small illustration will help to illuminate the issue. Suppose I am freely engaging in a conversation with you. Suddenly it occurs to me that I ought not to be saying to you what I am in the process of saying. Maybe the content is inappropriate (what I am telling you is a secret that needs to be kept), or maybe I should not be talking at all right now (we are attending a concert together, and the conductor has lifted her baton in preparation for the opening chord). So I cut myself off, perhaps in mid-sentence, perhaps in a mere fraction of a second. How quickly I stop talking depends both on the urgency of my becoming silent and on the interval that is required for my volition to assert its control over my vocal cords. What I cannot do, however, is bring it about that I am not talking to you *at the very instant in which the need for silence occurs to me*. As the rationale provided by Rota rightly says, it's just too late for that. Or in Peter Lombard's words, "free choice has to do not with the present or the past but with the future."

Rota, however, disagrees, and offers an ingenious argument, inspired by Suarez, for the view that (7) should be accepted. He poses a forced alternative: "either (a) nothing created exists except when it is temporally

⁷Francisco Suarez, *On Efficient Causality: Metaphysical Disputations* 17, 18, and 19, trans. Alfred J. Freddoso (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), disputation 19.9.1; quoted on 292.

present, or not (a)" (p. 293). (Of the alternatives, I affirm that (a) is true, for reasons that will appear later.) Now, suppose that what is true is the contradictory of (7), namely

- (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. (293)

Rota proceeds, "Next, if N is not free at T with respect to doing A at T, then it seems that we should say that A is not a free act *at T*" (293). But if (a) is true, the act A exists only while it is being performed, and if it is not a free act at that time it is not a free act at all. "Thus, given (a), (11) appears to imply that there are no free human acts" (293).

In response, I propose that we consider what should properly be meant by saying that A is a free act. (FW), I claim, gives a good account of what it is for a *person* to be free with respect to performing some action, but it is a distinct question what it is for an *act* to be free. In this connection, I suggest we look once again at the quotation from Suarez. According to the philosophers he 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. The combination is nicely illustrated by the example of my freely conversing with you. My talking to you is the result of a free decision, for which alternatives were available (I could have chosen to study the program notes rather than talking with you), and I am free to stop talking at any moment. To ask for more than this—that is, to ask that (7) should be true in this case—is to insist that, in order for the act to be free, it must be possible for me to bring it about that *at the very instant* when I realize that my *present action* of talking to you is inappropriate, it should *already be the case* that I am no longer talking with you. And that is surely absurd.⁸

Rota, however, observes that the proponent of divine timelessness has reason to object to (11), because its analogue for the divine case will be false. A timeless God has no temporal sequence in the events of his life. So if, when God performs an action A, he is not *at that very instant* free with respect to performing the action, it follows that God is not free at all or at any time. And that, surely, cannot be accepted.

Given the assumption of divine timelessness, this reasoning is correct. However, it is widely recognized that, in speaking about God, we need to recognize a relation of *logical or explanatory priority* even in cases where

⁸Note that it is by no means sufficient that my speaking should cease *at the very instant* in which I realize I should not be talking. That would require an instantaneous response that is beyond the power of any human being, but it still is not enough to satisfy (7).

there is no temporal priority. Thus, divine middle knowledge is “middle” precisely because, in the logical or explanatory order, it stands “between” God’s “natural knowledge” of the necessary truths, and his “free knowledge” of the propositions that are true in virtue of his own free creative activity. There is, however, no *temporal succession* as between these aspects of the divine knowledge. If we designate the stages in this logical or explanatory order as Moments, we can state an analogue of (11) as follows:

- (11*) For any timeless divine agent G who performs an act A at some Moment M, G is not free at M with respect to doing A at M.

This of course leaves it open that at some previous Moment M* G is free with respect to doing A at M, *even though* there is no temporal separation of M* from M. It seems, indeed, that the proponent of divine timelessness would be well advised to affirm (11*), and to hold that the Moment in which God exercises his free will is distinct from, and prior to, the Moment in which he performs his creative action(s). This is so because the Moment in which God exercises his choice is a Moment in which there are for God open alternatives, but in the Moment in which he carries out his creative action(s) one such alternative has been selected and the others rejected; God cannot be in both of these contradictory states at one and the same Moment.⁹ In any case, human beings certainly cannot acquire knowledge, deliberate, and act in the same temporal instant, so in their case there is no good reason to reject (11), or to accept (7).

I undertook to show that, given the correction as noted above, Rota’s argument fails to pose a problem for my argument for theological incompatibilism. This I believe has now been done, so I will not discuss his suggestions for alternative ways to remove the contradiction. I do want to say something about his response to my argument against Anselmian eternalism. At this point, however, not much more remains to be done on that front either. In my paper, “The Absence of a Timeless God,”¹⁰ I contend that “Anselmian eternalism” (the view that combines divine timelessness with a four-dimensionalist view of time) negates the alternative possibilities that are essential for free will. Following Rota’s numbering, I contend that

- (17) If a human agent T’s future action exists (in its full concrete particularity) in the divine eternity, then alternative possibilities for N’s action at that future time have been eliminated.¹¹

In support of this, I claim that the following two propositions describe situations that are categorically impossible:

⁹If the timeless God is conceived of as *responding* to the actions of created agents, the situation becomes more complicated, but the main point at issue here will not be affected.

¹⁰In *God and Time: Essays on the Divine Nature*, ed. Gregory E. Ganssle and David M. Woodruff, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 182–206.

¹¹299; see “Absence” 197–198. Rota is quite correct, by the way, in noting that my attitude towards divine timelessness has hardened considerably since the publication in 1989 of *God, Time, and Knowledge*. One lives and, hopefully, learns.

- (18) There are things that God timelessly believes which are such that it is in my power, now, to bring it about that God does not timelessly believe those things.
- (19) There are future actions of my own which timelessly exist in the divine eternity which are such that it is in my power, now, to bring about that those actions do not exist in eternity.¹²

Rota offers ingenious arguments to the effect that (17) is false and (18) and (19) are both true.¹³ However, all of these arguments depend on proposition (7), which I have repudiated and against which there is, I believe, a conclusive objection: I cannot, at a given time T, have the power to bring it about that a situation which *already obtains* at T does *not* obtain at T.¹⁴ So I invite the reader to consider (17), (18), and (19) on their own merits, and on that basis to reach a conclusion as to whether divine timeless knowledge (in the Anselmian or any other version) is consistent with libertarian free will.

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¹²"Absence" 198; quoted on 299.

¹³Here Rota's defense of Anselmian eternalism differs from that of Katherin Rogers. She admits that (18) and (19) cannot be true, but maintains that there are nevertheless alternative possibilities for created free agents. For comment on Rogers's view, see my review of her *Anselm on Freedom* in *Religious Studies* 49.4 (December 2009): 499–504.

¹⁴I may, of course, be able to bring it about that the situation in question no longer obtains *immediately after* T; I surmise that it is from this fact that (7) (as well as my ill-fated proposition P) derives whatever plausibility it may seem to have.