

Divine Foreknowledge and Changing the Past

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WHEN confronted with the apparent incompatibility of infallible, exhaustive divine foreknowledge (hereafter simply “foreknowledge”) with human libertarian freedom, the average proponent of foreknowledge responds with the claim that “God’s foreknowledge doesn’t *cause* my actions. What makes me not free?” Philosophers generally reject such a response because the problem of the incompatibility of freedom and foreknowledge is not a causal problem but rather a logical problem. What hinders me from performing certain actions is the logical incompatibility of (a) my performing that action and (b) God’s having always infallibly believed that I will not perform that action. Are these conditions, however, logically incompatible after all? I argue that there is no logical incompatibility involved; instead, incompatibilists¹ need to appeal to an ontological assumption that, while enjoying intuitive support, is not a logical truth.

I. Logical Incompatibility

The philosophically uninitiated compatibilist wants to know what it is that forces us to act in a certain way. In other words, when we say that we do not have the power to do something, we usually mean that some obsta-

¹ I use the term ‘incompatibilist’ to refer to those who deny the compatibility of libertarian human freedom and infallible, exhaustive divine foreknowledge. ‘Compatibilist’, conversely, will

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cle to our doing so exists. For example, if I do not have the power to speak Cambodian, it could be due to a number of reasons: I might not have the requisite knowledge or I might be physically constrained. In the case of divine foreknowledge, what is it that restrains me from acting freely?

The incompatibilist will respond that God's having always infallibly believed that I will do a certain thing logically precludes my acting any other way. This is similar to saying that I am not free to draw a square circle because it is logically impossible. If it is the case that God has always believed that I will not go to bed at midnight, I do not have the power to go to bed at midnight because it is logically impossible that I do so. The two cases, however, seem on the face of them to be very different. In the case of drawing a square circle, the logical impossibility is very straightforward: drawing a square circle violates the law of non-contradiction. In fact, a square circle is such a meaningless and contradictory concept that my inability to draw one does not seem to be much of a limitation. I am simply not able to do something that makes no sense.

In the case of my bedtime, however, going to bed at midnight does not seem absurd at all, whether God believes that I will or not. If God believes that I will not go to bed at midnight, and yet I do, it simply seems that He was wrong. God, however, is never wrong; therefore such a situation is contradictory, an incompatibilist will say. But before the situation can be contradictory and absurd, the incompatibilist has to add several premises that can easily be questioned. A square circle is contradictory simply in virtue of the definitions given to 'square' and to 'circle', but foreknowledge and freedom require something more: assertions about the nature of time itself.

II. The Inalterability of the Past

Let us look at a good example of the argument for incompatibility as it has been advanced by Blake Ostler. The argument as he illustrates it is very complete and easy to follow:

- (a) It has always been true that agent *P* will freely choose to perform action *x* at a future time *t* and it is possible to know this truth at all times (from the omnitemporality of truth).
- (b) God cannot fail to believe anything that is true and cannot believe anything that is false (from God's omniscience).

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- (c) God has always believed that agent *P* will freely choose to perform action *x* at time *t* (from (a) and (b)).
- (d) It is not in anyone's power to change God's past belief (from the inalterability of the past).
- (e) It is not in agent *P*'s power to change God's past belief that *P* will do *x* at *t* (from (c) and (d)).
- (f) If *P* does not perform *x* at *t*, then God did not always believe that *P* performs *x* at *t* (from (b)).
- (g) Therefore, it is not in agent *P*'s power to refrain from performing *x* at *t* (from (e) and (f)).
- (h) If agent *P* acts freely when he performs *x* at *t*, then it is within *P*'s power to refrain from performing *x* at *t* (from the definition of libertarian freedom).
- (i) Therefore, *P* does not act freely when *P* performs *x* at *t* (from (g) and (h)).²

This argument is valid—if we accept all the premises, we must accept the conclusion. Note, however, that this argument depends on much more than simple definitions and mathematics. It requires strong assertions about the nature of time, omniscience, freedom, and logic. Although I will focus upon the possibility of changing the past (premise (d)), I will also deal with each of the other assumptions made in the argument above.

III. Fatalism

The argument above for theological fatalism is closely related to an age-old argument for logical fatalism.³ This is because the existence of true propositions concerning future contingent events seems to contradict libertarian freedom in the argument for incompatibilism above *whether God knows the truth of all future propositions or not*. Consider this alternative

refer to those who affirm such compatibility.

² Adapted from Ostler 192–93. William Hasker presents a similar, though less complete, argument. See Hasker 69.

³ Theological fatalism is the idea that exhaustive infallible foreknowledge precludes libertarian free-

argument:

- (a) It has always been true that agent *P* will freely choose to perform action *x* at a future time *t* (from the omnitemporality of truth).
- (b) It is not in anyone's power to change the past (from the inalterability of the past).
- (c) It was true in the past (say at time *t'*) that agent *P* will freely choose to perform action *x* at time *t* (from (a)).
- (d) It is not in agent *P*'s power to change the truth of the past proposition that agent *P* will perform *x* at *t* (from (b) and (c)).
- (e) If *P* does not perform *x* at *t*, then it was always true that *P* will not perform *x* at *t* (from omnitemporality of truth).
- (f) Therefore, it is not in agent *P*'s power to refrain from performing *x* at *t* (from (d) and (e)).
- (g) If agent *P* acts freely when he performs *x* at *t*, then it is within *P*'s power to refrain from performing *x* at *t* (from the definition of libertarian freedom).
- (h) Therefore, *P* does not act freely when *P* performs *x* at *t* (from (f) and (g)).

In this argument, if it was true in the past that I will eat pancakes tomorrow, then that past proposition cannot be changed. This means that I am not free to refrain from eating pancakes tomorrow. God's knowledge, it seems, is not a necessary part of the argument for fatalism. Logically, if past propositions about the future are true and if the past is unchangeable, then the future is also unchangeable; no agent is therefore free. This is the argument for logical fatalism made famous by Richard Taylor among others.⁴

It seems to follow that revising our definition of omniscience (premise (b)) is insufficient to overcome fatalism. We may be tempted to revise our definition to assert that an omniscient being knows everything that is knowable, with the intention of including future contingents in the category of truths that are unknowable, but if we want to maintain both the

dom. Logical fatalism is the idea that the truth of future-tense propositions precludes liber-

omnitemporality of truth and the inalterability of the past, such a revision is insufficient. If we want to maintain that we are free in a libertarian sense, we must assume either that it is possible to change the past in some sense, or that contingent statements about the future are neither true nor false (or, alternatively, simply false). Either route will work, although denying the omnitemporality of truth involves denying a central tenet of traditional logic.

Blake Ostler takes the alternate route: he argues that past propositions can be changed in a manner in which past events cannot.⁵ This means that, while I cannot change God's past belief that I will eat pancakes tomorrow, I can change the past proposition that I will eat pancakes tomorrow, as long as no one knows the truth of the proposition.

Ostler's argument, however, contradicts his own analysis of the necessity of the past. The very same reasons that Ostler gives for the necessity of past events can also be applied to the necessity of past propositions:

It is certainly contradictory to assert that 'Lincoln delivered the Gettysburg address in 1863' is now true but that someone could bring it about that 'Lincoln did not deliver the Gettysburg address in 1863' is also now true.... Not even an omnipotent being can change the past. To make this latter statement true, God would have to undo many past events and make many statements that are now true to be false.⁶

The meat of Ostler's argument for the necessity of the past seems to be that it is impossible to "make many statements that are now true to be false." Thus, if it is now true that Lincoln gave the Gettysburg address in 1863, it is impossible to make it subsequently true that Lincoln did not give the Gettysburg address in 1863. The argument, however, applies to past propositions as well; if it is now true that 'Bob will eat pancakes tomorrow was true yesterday', it is impossible to make it subsequently true that 'Bob will eat pancakes tomorrow was not true yesterday'. Ostler offers no reason why past necessity should not apply to past propositions in this way.

Nevertheless, a large number of contemporary theologians and philosophers agree with Ostler that it is possible to change the truth value of past propositions about the future. When it comes to an actual event, however, such as God's knowledge, many argue that it is impossible to change the event in question.⁷ What is it about actual events that differs from the truth value of propositions? I will explore these issues in the next two sections, arguing that there is no logical impossibility involved in changing God's past beliefs.

IV. Changing the Past

Certainly, we have intuitions about the impossibility of changing the past. We normally feel that, while the future is open to unlimited possibilities, we can do nothing to alter the past, no matter how much many of us would like to do so. But is it the case that every aspect of the past is inalterable? Until we can determine the nature of the inalterability of the past, we cannot resolve the question of the compatibility of divine foreknowledge and human freedom. We should note, however, that the problem of incompatibility here is not simply a logical one at all, but an ontological problem concerning the nature of time.

One limitation that we must face in resolving the issue of the inalterability of the past is the limited capacity of human language for discussing the ontological existence of God. Our language is based upon (and even partially determines) our experience of the world as mediated by

⁴ See, for example, Richard Taylor's works "The Problem of Future Contingencies" and *Metaphysics* 35–67.

⁵ Ostler 192.

⁶ Ostler 191, italics removed.

⁷ I am assuming that God's knowledge is an event. David Hunt claims that God's past beliefs can be changed because 'belief' is an equivocal word. Thus, God's believing something does not necessarily entail a physical event. If I know or believe that today is Tuesday, it does not follow that I ever consciously think that today is Tuesday. What follows is only that I have the capacity to consciously realize that today is Tuesday if I think about it. Thus, the fact that God believed in 1945 that I would write this paper in 2002 does not entail that God consciously thought in 1945 about my writing this paper. Although Hunt's argument avoids theological fatalism, his version of foreknowledge is useless. For God's foreknowledge to be useful for Him, He must consciously think about the future; my knowledge that it is Tuesday is useless for me unless I am faced with a situation in which I consciously realize what day of the week it is, e.g. when I wake up

sense experience. Most of us feel, however, that God is not limited by language nor by human sensory experience; He likely experiences events in a much different way than we do, a way that we cannot possibly claim to understand or to know. Those who presume to limit God's experience of time through finite human language and intuitions should pause to reconsider whether their claims are more presumptuous than they intend them to be.⁸

That said, I will attempt to present some ideas about our understanding of the nature of time as we experience it. Do we have any reason to suppose that it is possible for me to act in such a way that, were I to do so, God would never have held a belief that He in fact did hold? Initially, each of us would say no, but I will present some reasons for believing that such action might in fact be possible.

We should begin by examining what exactly it might mean to change the past. First, it could mean either that we could act in such a way as to bring about something that did in fact happen or in such a way as to prevent something from happening that did not happen. The possibility of such actions has been questioned, but they will take a back seat here to another way of changing the past that must be defended in order for compatibilists to justify their position: we might be able to change the past in the sense that we act in such a way as to bring about something that did not in fact happen or in such a way as to prevent something from happening that did in fact happen. If we can defend these two ways of changing the past, we can save the first two, weaker ways of bringing about the past.

One may respond that we do not actually need to be able to change the past; instead, we only need to be able to bring it about in the first sense mentioned. This response, however, does not fit with the commonly accepted definition of libertarian freedom. Under this definition, in order to be truly free with respect to going to bed at midnight I must both have the power to go to bed at midnight and to refrain from going to bed at midnight. If God has always believed that I will not go to bed at midnight, then in order for me to go to bed at midnight without proving God wrong, I

in the morning and remember what I need to do today. So it is with foreknowledge. God may not have consciously thought in 1945 that I would write a paper in 2002, but He must have con-

must have the power to bring it about that God always believed that I will go to bed at midnight, thereby altering a belief that God has always held.⁹

A possible objection is that I need not have the power to change God's beliefs because I will never exercise it. In taking such an approach, however, while still maintaining that I am free with respect to going to bed, we must compromise our definition of freedom by rejecting libertarian freedom in favor of soft determinism. Soft determinists define freedom as the ability to do what we want to do. While we are free to act upon our desires, however, we are not necessarily free to choose what our desires are. By accepting soft determinism we can maintain human freedom, but it is a much watered-down version of human freedom. Before we ever act, it is already determined what we will do—we have no *real* free choice in the matter. Granted, we are free from external compulsion, but we are still not truly free in the sense that most of us want to believe.

Ostler gives an excellent example to show the counter-intuitive nature of this kind of freedom.¹⁰ In this example, a group of scientists place a device in the brain of a subject named Rock that allows the scientists to manipulate Rock's desires. When the scientists want a candy bar, they cause Rock to desire to steal a candy bar. Rock then acts upon this desire. Of course, most people would say that Rock is not morally responsible for his actions because he was not free. According to soft determinism, however, he was free; he was free to act upon his desire. The source of his desire does not enter into the freedom equation. Thus, Rock should be morally responsible (if anyone who freely commits a crime should be morally responsible) for his actions.

If we are free only to act upon our desires, God could easily become the cause of all our actions. Thus, our desires determine our actions, and God in turn determines our desires. This view of freedom preserves an extremely strong notion of divine providence, but it is both counter-intuitive and inconsistent with the strong notion of libertarian freedom that we are seeking to preserve. In order to maintain libertarian freedom

sciously thought sometime in the past that I would write this paper; otherwise, His foreknowledge has been entirely useless. Foreknowledge thus becomes, at some point in the past, a physical event.

⁸ I am not here arguing that God is atemporal. It is not incompatible to assert that our past, pres-

with respect to our actions, we must assert that we are both able to perform and to refrain from performing an action, regardless of which course we choose. If God has infallible, exhaustive foreknowledge, then we must be able to bring about a change in His past beliefs.

Changing the past in the sense of bringing it about must be differentiated from causing the past. During everyday life, we bring about many things that we would not say that we had caused; nevertheless, the occurrence of the events that we bring about is dependent upon our own actions. For example, by speaking to Bob I bring it about that Bob believes that I spoke to him, but we would not want to say that I had caused his belief. Similarly, the jailer who gave poison to Socrates may have caused Socrates's death, and he may have brought about Socrates's widow's mourning, but he did not cause the latter's mourning.

The first of these examples, involving Bob's belief, is particularly important for our examination, for this is exactly the kind of bringing about that we mean when we say that we could bring about God's past belief. Hence, we do not need to affirm retrocausation in order to affirm the possibility of bringing about God's past belief. Perhaps, as William Craig suggests, although it is possible to bring about the past, the impossibility of retrocausation is responsible for our intuitions about the inalterability of the past.¹¹ What we are asserting when we assert that our actions can bring about God's past belief is not that causal chains can run backwards, but that what God believes is partially dependent upon what we do in the future.

V. The Nature of Time

The question remains, however, whether it is possible to act in such a way that God did not believe what He in fact did believe. I can see three reasons why we would say that we cannot change the past, none of which seem to be insurmountable for the special case of divine foreknowledge. These reasons include the possibility of circularity, the problem of memory, and intuitions about time.

The possibility of circularity is the possibility that something I do in the present will affect the past in such a way that it is impossible for me to

have done what I did in the present. For example, I could do something that brings about the death of my parents before I was ever born. Conversely, I could bring about something in the past that is the condition of the possibility of my action in the present. For example, I could travel to the past and through some kind of technology become both of my own parents.

Such causal loops are devastating to a theory of bringing about the past, but not in the special case of divine foreknowledge. Divine foreknowledge per se does not create any kind of causal loop; God must act in some way on the basis of His foreknowledge in order to cause problems of circularity. Alvin Plantinga, for example, suggests that we can make a decision so monumental that “if God had foreseen that you would choose that alternative, he would have acted very differently. Perhaps he would have created different persons; perhaps, indeed, he would not have created Abraham.”¹² But what if the person who acted in such a way as to bring it about that God did not create Abraham is herself a descendent of Abraham? Even if we grant that God acts providentially in the world based upon His foreknowledge, however, I see no reason to assume that God is not intelligent enough to avoid such problems. Divine providence based upon His foreknowledge is a very complicated issue that is beyond the scope of this paper, but I see no reason to assume that God could not avoid causal loops.

The second problem with altering the past is the phenomenon of memory. I currently remember that Queen Elizabeth has been Queen of England for my entire life. What if, however, I were to do something that would bring it about that Queen Elizabeth never became queen? Are my memories suddenly wiped out? The consequences for much of the world would be enormous; my entire life might be greatly affected. Such a scenario seems implausible and seems to cast doubts upon the possibility of changing the past.

As long as we never experience the results of God’s beliefs, memory is not a problem. Certainly we never directly experience His beliefs; unless God acts in some certain way according to His foreknowledge or directly reveals His beliefs to us, the problem of memory can never be an issue. To

what extent we experience the results of divine action on the basis of foreknowledge is the subject, once again, for another paper. The scriptural examples of prophecy, however, often seem to be examples of God's revealing to mankind His knowledge about future freely chosen events. What if Christ prophesied that Peter would reject Him three times, but Peter freely chose to reject Him only twice? Peter's free action would change Christ's past belief, which presumably would also change His prophecy. What then happens to Peter's memory of the original prophecy?

A very adequate response is that it is also possible to change past memories. When Peter's action brings about a change in the past, it becomes the case that Christ never made the original prophecy; instead, He prophesied that Peter would only deny Him twice. Since Christ never made the original prophecy, Peter never remembered it. The only case in which memory might become a problem is a case in which the memory of the person involved is required for the possibility of her action. For example, if Christ's prophecy was the motivation for Peter's not denying Him the third time, but Peter's not denying Him obliterated the prophecy, we seem to find ourselves in a circle similar to those already discussed. Once again, we must assume that God is intelligent enough to avoid such circles.

A second option is to see prophecy in a different way. Richard Rice, who does not accept exhaustive divine foreknowledge, explains prophecy in three ways. First, God can unilaterally bring to pass any prophecy he makes. Second, "a prophecy may also express God's knowledge that something will happen because...nothing could conceivably prevent it."¹³ In other words, God might see that some outcome is inevitable. Finally, prophecies can be contingent; for example, a city will be destroyed if the people do not repent.¹⁴ Christ's prophecy to Peter could fall into any one of the three categories.

We have at least two routes, then, to explain prophecy: we can either bite the bullet and admit that our memories can change or we can alter our conception of prophecy. It seems that there is no reason to think that the problem of memory is an insurmountable problem for compatibilists.

The third objection to bringing about the past involves our intu-

ent, and future can be simultaneously present before God and that God experiences time. God's

itions about the nature of time. Two dominant theories of time exist: the A-theory and the B-theory. According to the A-theory of time, only the present is actual; the past is no longer actual, and the future is not yet actual. According to the B-theory of time, however, past, present, and future are all equally actual. Time thus acts as a fourth dimension. Bill Hasker writes of the B-theory of time that “all of time exists ‘simultaneously’, as a sort of four-dimensional solid in the space-time continuum, with only human consciousness marking the distinction between ‘now’ and ‘then’.”¹⁵

The A-theory seems to be the more common-sense theory of the two. We experience the past as something that once was but is now irretrievably gone, while the future is not real except in the sense of myriad possibilities. Nevertheless, we should not be so arrogant as to assume that we have a pristine view, as if through an unspotted window, of the world—especially of time—as it is in itself. As already noted, our experience is mediated by language and sensory processes. The modern Einsteinian picture of the universe seems to imply a B-theory of time; the special theory of relativity posits a “relativity of simultaneity” in which the simultaneity and even time of occurrence of events depends upon the observer. Given this type of relativity of past and present, it doesn’t take much for the imagination to conclude that past, present, and future depend upon the observer. Upon the death of his friend Michele Besso, Einstein wrote to Besso’s son and sister: “He has preceded me briefly in bidding farewell to this strange world. This signifies nothing. For us believing physicists the distinction between past, present, and future is only an illusion, even if a stubborn one.”¹⁶

Although there appear to be flaws to Kurt Gödel’s “proof,” using Einstein’s equations, of the possibility of time travel,¹⁷ modern physics seems to present good reason to accept a B-theory of time. We certainly should not reject the theory out of hand simply because of our everyday experience of time—particularly when we are speaking about the experience of a divine personage whose experience of time we cannot claim to

time may simply be a different time.

⁹ Hasker points out that compatibilists must affirm the possibility of changing the past in the

fully comprehend.

As we have seen, there are no convincing reasons to accept the logical impossibility of bringing about or changing God's past beliefs. It is not necessary that we actually change God's past beliefs; in order to maintain libertarian freedom, we have only to maintain that it is *possible* for us to change His beliefs. Of course, from our perspective we would never be able to know that we had changed God's beliefs; we would say that God had simply known beforehand what we were going to do. I could say, for example, that God had always known that I would go to bed at midnight, but that, had I not gone to bed at that time, He *would have* believed otherwise.

I have not dealt much here with the issue of divine providence (the use God makes of His foreknowledge), but I think that I have shown that there is no logical incompatibility between exhaustive infallible foreknowledge and human libertarian freedom. Until incompatibilists can find a convincing argument against changing the past in the special case of divine foreknowledge, compatibilists need not surrender to claims that human freedom and divine foreknowledge are logically incompatible. Incompatibilists' strongest supportable claim is that accepting divine foreknowledge requires us to reject certain common-sense intuitions about the nature of time. Forcing human intuitions about time onto God, however, is an anthropomorphic move that compatibilists do not need to accept.

sense I have described, but he never offers an argument against such a possibility. Instead, like

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most philosophers (including compatibilists), he simply assumes that changing the past is impossible. See 96–143.

¹⁰ Ostler 203–04.

¹¹ Craig 191.

¹² Plantinga 257.

¹³ Rice 51.

¹⁴ Rice 50–53.

¹⁵ Hasker 127–28.

¹⁶ Hoffmann 257–58.

¹⁷ See Craig 140–41.

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