

IS THE EXISTENCE OF GOD A “HARD” FACT ?¹

NELSON PIKE, in his article, “Divine Omniscience and Voluntary Action,” argues that if an essentially omniscient and everlasting God exists, no human action is voluntary.² Pike’s argument depends upon the following two claims:

4. It is not within one’s power at a given time to do something that would bring it about that someone who held a certain belief at a time prior to the time in question did not hold that belief at the time prior to the time in question.
5. It is not within one’s power at a given time to do something that would bring it about that a person who existed at an earlier time did not exist at an earlier time.³

In “Of God and Freedom,”⁴ Professor Saunders evidently intends to discount these claims by arguing that the following statement

(A) One does not have the power (at a given time) so to act that the past (relative to that time) would be other than it was.

is false. Pike points out in the first part of his reply to Saunders that (A) has unrestricted application to all facts about the past.⁵ He distinguishes “hard” from “soft” facts about the past (see Section I below) and claims that premises (4) and (5) are about restricted classes of “hard” facts: namely, facts about the beliefs and existence of persons respectively. But, Pike says, Saunders has argued only that (A) is false as applied to “soft” facts and

¹ I wish to thank Professor Nelson Pike for his encouragement and comments in the preparation of this paper. I am also indebted to my husband, Robert Merrihew Adams, and to Professor Keith Donnellan for helpful discussions and suggestions. Needless to say, however, none of these persons necessarily agrees with everything I say here.

² Nelson Pike, “Divine Omniscience and Voluntary Action,” *Philosophical Review*, LXXIV (1965), 27-46.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

⁴ John Turk Saunders, “Of God and Freedom,” *Philosophical Review*, LXXV (1966), 219-225.

⁵ Nelson Pike, “Of God and Freedom: A Rejoinder,” *Philosophical Review*, LXXV (1966), 369-379.

has given no reason to think that (A) is false as applied to these restricted classes of “hard” facts as well. Elsewhere in his rejoinder, Pike indicates that in the original paper he had intended “belief” and “person” to occur in their ordinary senses in premises (4) and (5) respectively.⁶ So understood, premises (4) and (5) seem to me to be true statements about “hard” facts. Pike seems also to concede that Saunders is right in claiming that (A) is false as applied to “soft” facts.

In this paper I shall assume that Saunders and Pike are correct at least in thinking that (A) is not generally true as applied to “soft” facts about the past. I shall argue, however, that the existence of an essentially omniscient and everlasting God is not a “hard” fact, and that as a consequence the argument of Pike’s original paper fails. By arguing in this way, I shall be insisting on a position Pike considers in the second part of his reply to Saunders.

I

It is useful before proceeding with the argument briefly to examine the distinction between “hard” and “soft” facts. Pike makes the distinction between “hard” and “soft” facts about the past by contrasting facts which were “fully accomplished” or “over-and-done-with” at a given past time with those which were not.⁷ I think that the distinction Pike has in mind can also be drawn in terms of a statement’s being about a given time. This alternative explanation is no less intuitive (it relies on an intuitive understanding of “happening” and “actual”), but it will be more convenient for my purposes.⁸ Consider the following.

<p>(B) “Statement p is at least in part about a time t”</p>	<p>= <i>df.</i></p>	<p>“The happening or not happening, actuality or nonactuality of some- thing at t is a necessary condition of the truth of p.”</p>
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Thus the statement “Caesar died 2009 years before Saunders

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 377-378.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 369-370.

⁸ The following way of explaining the distinction was suggested to me by Robert Merrihew Adams.

wrote his paper" is at least in part about 44 B.C., since Caesar's death at that time is a necessary condition of the truth of that statement. It is also at least in part about 1965 A.D. since Saunders' writing his paper in 1965 A.D. is also a necessary condition of the truth of that statement. Given (B) the notion of a "hard" fact may be explained as follows.

(C) "Statement p expresses a "hard" fact about a time t " = *df.* " p is not at least in part about any time future relative to t ."

Hence the statement "Caesar died in 44 B.C." expresses a "hard" fact about 44 B.C. But the statement "Caesar died 2009 years before Saunders wrote his paper" does not, since it is at least in part about 1965 A.D.

It should be clear from the above examples that the tense of the verb of the sentence used to express the statement in question is no indication of the times which the statement is in part about. A sentence with a past-tense verb may express a statement which is in part about the present and future; with a present-tense verb, the past and future; and with a future-tense verb, the present and past.

II

The two features of the concept of God which are important for Pike's argument and with which I shall be concerned are *essential* everlastingness and *essential* omniscience.

The doctrine that God is everlasting can be summarized in two claims. The first is that God is the kind of thing to which temporal predicates apply—that is to say, God has time location. Thus according to this doctrine, it would not be a category mistake to say that God exists *now*, or that he existed *before* Saunders wrote his paper and *after* the death of Caesar. The second is that if God exists at any time, then He exists at all times.

To say that God is omniscient is also to make two claims about Him. The first is that God holds no false beliefs—that is, if God believes that p , then p . The second is that God's knowledge is complete; and therefore, if p , then God believes that p . Thus God is said to know everything that happens in the created world.

Further, if God is said to be everlasting as well as omniscient, it is said that God has *always* known everything that happens, has happened, or will happen in the created world. Thus for everything that happens, has happened, or will happen, it is true to say that God knew it was going to happen *before* it happened.

What further is meant by saying not just that God is everlasting and omniscient, but also that He is *essentially* everlasting and *essentially* omniscient? I shall consider two answers to this question. The first is that the statements "God is everlasting" and "God is omniscient" are analytic (more formally, " x is God" entails " x is everlasting"; and " x is God" entails " x is omniscient"). The second (the answer which Pike gives) is to claim not just that the statements "God is everlasting" and "God is omniscient" are analytic, but in addition that the person x who is God would not be the individual person he is if he failed either to be everlasting or to be omniscient.

In what follows I shall begin by interpreting the doctrines of essential everlastingness and essential omniscience in the first way and argue from each of these doctrines in turn that the existence of an essentially omniscient and everlasting God is not a "hard" fact. In addition, I shall try to show how Pike's argument would fail if he had interpreted these doctrines in the first way. In the remainder of the paper, I shall maintain that these results are damaging to Pike's original argument even if one interprets the doctrines of essential everlastingness and essential omniscience as Pike does.

III

Consider the doctrine of God according to which the statements "God is everlasting" and "God is omniscient" are analytic.

1. The following is an argument from the doctrine of essential everlastingness alone that the existence of God is not a "hard" fact.

(D) "God is everlasting" is analytic (that is, " x is God" entails " x is everlasting").

(E) " x is everlasting" = *df.* "If $(\exists t)(x$ exists at t), then $(t)(x$ exists at t)."

∴ (F) “ x is God” entails “If $(\exists t)(x$ exists at t), then $(t)(x$ exists at t).”

∴ (G) “ x is God and $(\exists t)(x$ exists at t)” entails “ $(t)(x$ exists at t).”

What (G) says is that it is a necessary condition of the truth of the claim that some extant individual x is God, that that individual exist at all times whatever. But the statement that an individual x exists at all times whatever is a statement which is in part about the future (future relative to any time t for which there is a t' later than t). Hence the statement that some extant individual x is God is a statement which is at least in part about the future. Therefore, the statement that some extant individual x (for whatever extant x you choose) is God does not state a “hard” fact about any time t for which there is a time t' later than t .

Therefore, it follows merely from the claim that the statement “God is everlasting” is analytic that the existence of an essentially omniscient and everlasting God is not a “hard” fact about any time t for which there is a t' later than t . Hence, assuming that (A) is at least not generally true as applied to “soft” facts about the past, one cannot conclude by reference to (A) alone that it is not within someone’s power at a time t' so to act that God would not have existed at an earlier time t even though He did exist at t . In particular, one cannot conclude by reference to (A) alone, that if an individual x is God at t (and hence in fact exists at all times whatever), no one can have the power at a time t' later than t so to act that x not exist at that *later* time (although if x is God at t , no one will in fact exercise such a power at t').

I think the result just derived, if correct, indicates that Pike’s argument would be invalid if he interpreted the doctrine of essential everlastingness in the first way. Pike claims to show that if an essentially omniscient and everlasting God exists, then Jones who mowed his lawn at t_2 did not have the power at t_2 to refrain from mowing his lawn. He proceeds by offering three (supposedly exhaustive) alternative descriptions of Jones’s alleged power at t_2 to refrain from mowing his lawn—namely, “the power at t_2 to do something that would have brought it about that God held a false belief at t_1 ,” “the power at t_2 to do something which would

have brought it about that God did not hold the belief he held at t_1 ," and "the power at t_2 to bring it about that God did not exist at t_1 "—and by eliminating each on the grounds that it is conceptually impossible that a human being have such a power (see steps 6-9 of Pike's original argument). Pike cites premise (5) as a warrant for step (9), the step in which he rejects the last of those descriptions. But if "person" occurs in its ordinary sense in premise (5), then premise (5) is a conceptual truth about what is within the power of human beings as regards a restricted class of "hard" facts. No reason has yet been given for supposing that it follows from the claim that it is conceptually impossible that a human being so act at t_2 that a certain "hard" fact—namely, the existence of a particular person—about t_1 would be other than it was, that it is conceptually impossible that a human being so act at t_2 that a certain "soft" fact—namely, the existence of God—about t_1 would be other than it was.

Therefore, if Pike had interpreted the doctrine of essential everlastingness in the first way, his inference of (9) from (5) would be invalid. Hence his argument would not provide sufficient reason for denying to Jones who mowed his lawn at t_2 the power at t_2 to refrain from mowing his lawn.

2. The following argument from the doctrine of essential omniscience may be used to establish the same conclusions.

- (H) " x is God" entails "If p , then x believes p ."
- ∴ (I) " p " entails "If x is God, then x believes p ."
- (J) " x is God" entails "If x believes p , then p ."
- ∴ (K) " x believes p " entails "If x is God, then p ."

Either the individual x holds beliefs about the future or x does not hold beliefs about the future. If x holds no beliefs about the future, then by (I) x is not God, since there are true statements about the future. But, applying (K), if x holds beliefs about the future, it is a necessary condition of individual x 's being God that those beliefs about the future are true. Hence, that certain things happen (or do not happen) or obtain (or fail to obtain) in the future is a necessary condition of any individual x who holds beliefs about the future, being God. But since at any time t for which there is a t' later than t only individuals who hold beliefs about the future can be God, it is a necessary condition of any

individual x 's being God that certain things happen (or do not happen) or obtain (or fail to obtain) in the future. In that case, the statement that an individual x is God is a statement which does not express a "hard" fact about any time t for which there is a t' later than t .

Therefore, that the existence of God is not a "hard" fact about any time t for which there is a t' later than t follows also merely from the claim that "God is omniscient" is analytic. Since (A) is not generally true as regards "soft" facts about the past, one cannot conclude by reference to (A) alone that it is not within someone's power at t' so to act that the belief that p held at t by the individual x who is in fact God would be false.

In particular, one could not conclude by reference to (A) alone that Jones does not have the power at t_2 so to act that God would not have existed at t_1 in virtue of his having the power at t_2 to refrain from mowing his lawn. Consider the following. For any x whatever, the statement " x is God" does not express a "hard" fact about t_1 (since *ex hypothesi* there is a time t_2 later than t_1). Suppose an individual x believes at t_1 that Jones will mow his lawn at t_2 . No reason has been given to suppose that Jones may not have the power at t_2 so to act that the belief of x at t_1 would be false even though the belief of x at t_1 was in fact true: namely, the power at t_2 to refrain from mowing his lawn. But by the argument from the doctrine of essential omniscience just presented, that power of Jones would be the power at t_2 so to act that an individual x who believed at t_1 that Jones would mow his lawn at t_2 was not God. If a certain individual x is God, then he must have believed at t_1 that Jones would mow his lawn at t_2 since Jones did mow his lawn at t_2 . Further, assuming that x is the sole possessor of some of the other attributes of God,⁹

⁹ This assumption is required to forestall the following objection. Suppose there are two individuals y and z who are alike in all respects except that y believed at t_1 that Jones would mow his lawn at t_2 and z believed at t_1 that Jones would refrain from mowing his lawn at t_2 . Suppose further that the properties which y and z share include all the essential attributes of God except omniscience. Since Jones mowed his lawn at t_2 , z was not God at t_1 , though y may have been God at t_1 (if all the beliefs y and z share are true). Nevertheless, Jones's power at t_2 to refrain from mowing his lawn would not necessarily be the power at t_2 so to act that God would not have

no individual who did not believe at t_1 that Jones would mow his lawn at t_2 was God. Hence, assuming that x is the sole possessor of some of the other essential attributes of God, Jones's power at t_2 to refrain from mowing his lawn would be the power at t_2 so to act that God would not have existed at t_1 even though He did exist at t_1 . Therefore, one could not conclude by reference to (A) alone that Jones does not have the power at t_2 so to act that God would not have existed at t_1 in virtue of his having the power at t_2 to refrain from mowing his lawn.

As discussed above in connection with the argument from essential everlastingness, Pike cites premise (5) as his warrant for denying to Jones the power at t_2 so to act that God would not have existed at t_1 . But again, if "person" occurs in its ordinary sense in premise (5), then premise (5) is a conceptual truth about what is within the power of human beings as regards a restricted class of "hard" facts. No reason has yet been given for supposing that it follows from the claim that it is conceptually impossible that a human being so act at t_2 that a certain "hard" fact—namely, the existence of a particular person—about t_1 would be other than it was, that it is conceptually impossible that a human being so act at t_2 that a certain "soft" fact—namely, the existence of God—about t_1 would be other than it was.

Therefore, if Pike had interpreted either the doctrine of essential everlastingness or the doctrine of essential omniscience in the first way, his inference of (9) from (5) would be invalid. Hence his argument would not provide a sufficient reason for denying to Jones who mowed his lawn at t_2 the power at t_2 to refrain from mowing his lawn.

IV

The arguments in Section III explicitly presuppose analyses

existed at t_1 . For, if Jones had refrained from mowing his lawn at t_2 , y would not have been God at t_1 , but instead z might have been God at t_1 (if all the beliefs y and z share are true). (This objection was raised by Robert Merrihew Adams.)

I think it is logically impossible that more than one individual have all the essential properties of God except omniscience, but I shall not defend this claim here.

of essential everlastingness and essential omniscience different from those Pike employs in his argument. Pike agrees that the doctrines of essential everlastingness and essential omniscience imply that "God is everlasting" and "God is omniscient" are analytic. But he thinks that these doctrines also imply that everlastingness and omniscience are connected in a special way with the personal identity of the individual who is God: that is, if the individual x who is God failed either to be everlasting or to be omniscient, not only would x fail to be God but also x would fail to be the individual person x is.

I think, however, that this way of analyzing essential everlastingness and essential omniscience is in conflict with the criteria of identity for our ordinary concept "person." In the remainder of the paper I shall try to show that in view of this difficulty the reasoning offered in Section III above is telling against Pike's argument even if one interprets the doctrines of essential everlastingness and essential omniscience as Pike does.

As noted at the outset, Pike indicated in his original paper that he understood the concept "person" involved to be the ordinary concept "person." Further, it is clear that he thinks that an extant individual x 's being a person and being the individual person he is are "hard" facts. For he seems to grant to Saunders that (A) is false as applied to "soft" facts, but denies that this concession damages premises (4) and (5).

If Pike were right in supposing that, say, omniscience can be tied to the conditions of personal identity (in the ordinary sense), it would be apparent why he thought he could infer from (5) that it was not within Jones's power at t_2 so to act that God would not have existed at t_1 even though He did exist at t_1 (step 9 of Pike's original argument). For on Pike's analysis, the individual x who is God must be such that if x failed to be omniscient and so failed to be God, x would be a different individual person from the person he in fact is. Therefore, if someone had the power at t_2 so to act that x would not have been omniscient at t_1 and hence not God at t_1 even though x was omniscient at t_1 and was God at t_1 , he would have the power so to act that x would not have been the individual person he in fact was. But premise (5) says that it is impossible that any human being should have that

power. Thus if omniscience could be tied to personal identity (in the ordinary sense) in the way Pike's analysis presupposes, it would be impossible that Jones should have the power at t_2 so to act that the person x who is God would not have been omniscient at t_1 and hence not God at t_1 , so that his inference of (9) from (5) would be legitimate.

If, however, the ordinary concept of person is such that to be a person in the ordinary sense is a "hard" fact, and if the criteria of identity for the ordinary concept of person are such that to be the individual person one is is a "hard" fact, then being omniscient (or everlasting) can be a necessary condition neither of an individual x 's being a person in the ordinary sense nor of x 's being the individual person x is. For the arguments in Section III show that " x is everlasting" and " x is omniscient" express "soft" facts about any time t for which there is a time t' later than t . And if x 's being a person in the ordinary sense, or x 's being the individual person (in the ordinary sense) that x is, depended upon x 's being omniscient or everlasting, then x 's being a person in the ordinary sense, or being the individual person (in the ordinary sense) that x is, would be "soft" facts—which they are not. It seems, therefore, that Pike's analysis of essential omniscience cannot be correct if it is assumed that the concept involved is the ordinary concept of person.

It is possible, of course, to construct an extraordinary concept of person—"person₂"—such that an individual x would not be the individual person₂ x is if x failed to have any one of the attributes traditionally assigned to God. Might not Pike repair his inference of (9) from (5) by replacing "person" (in the ordinary sense) in (5) with "person₂"? I think not. For x 's being the individual person₂ x is will not be a "hard" fact about any time t for which there is a t' later than t . Hence, since (A) is not generally true as applied to "soft" facts about the past, one cannot conclude from (A) alone that it is conceptually impossible that a human being have the power at t' so to act that a given person₂ would not have existed at an earlier time t even though that person₂ did exist at t . No reason has been given for supposing that the statement obtained by replacing "person" (in the ordinary sense) in (5) by "person₂" is true. Hence there is no reason

to suppose that the inference of (9) from (5) (where "person" in 5 is replaced by "person₂") is sound.

Therefore, there is no adequate reason to suppose that Pike's inference of (9) from (5) holds good even if one employs a doctrine of God according to which "God is a person₂" is analytic.

V

When considering objections similar to the ones I have raised in Section IV,¹⁰ Pike expresses doubts as to whether or not they hold good but makes the following remarks as regards the consequences if they do hold good:

if the stipulation that God is essentially omniscient constitutes a modification of the ordinary concept of *person* and if this modification is sufficient to falsify principle 5, then we can no longer claim that God is a *person*. Again, what sense would it make to claim that God is a person and then to add that He is a person of such a sort that it would be within someone's power at a given time so to act that a person (of that sort) who existed at an earlier time would not have existed at an earlier time? This would simply be to say that the (so-called) person named "God" was not a *person* at all.

I think that Pike here misreads the upshot of the above objections to his argument. Neither the claim that the statement " x is God" does not express a "hard" fact about any time t for which there is a time t' later than t , nor the claim that the statement "God is a person₂" is analytic, is inconsistent with the claim that the statement "God is a person (in the ordinary sense)" is analytic. For to insist on all three of these claims is in effect to assert (i) that the individual x who is God falls under three concepts—"God," "person₂," and the ordinary concept "person"—the criteria of identity for each of which are different from the criteria of identity for each of the other two; and (ii) that it is a necessary condition for an individual x 's falling under one of these concepts (that is, the concept "God") that that individual x fall under each of the other two concepts (that is, the concept "person₂")

¹⁰ Nelson Pike, "Of God and Freedom: A Rejoinder," *Philosophical Review*, LXXV (1966), 378.

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and the ordinary concept "person") where the criteria of identity for the concept "person₂" are different from the criteria of identity for the ordinary concept "person." But I can see no logical difficulty with (i), with (ii), or with their conjunction; and in any case no reason has been given by Pike to suppose that there is such a difficulty. Therefore, no reason has been given why one cannot say that it is a necessary condition of an individual x 's being God that x be a person (in the ordinary sense), even if one admits that x would be the same individual person (in the ordinary sense) that x is even if x were not God, and claims that x would not be the same person₂ that x is if x were not God.

What is self-contradictory, assuming that my argument in Section IV is correct, is the claim that x 's having any and/or all of the attributes traditionally assigned to God is a necessary condition of x 's being the individual person (in the ordinary sense) that x is. But so far as I can see, one can still claim that God is a person in the ordinary sense and further that the statement "God is a person (in the ordinary sense)" is analytic. And this is true even if it be granted that "God is a person₂" is analytic.

VI

In sum, I have argued that the existence of an essentially omniscient and everlasting God is not a "hard" fact and consequently that there is no adequate reason to suppose that Pike's inference of (9) from (5) in his original argument is legitimate. The claim that the existence of an essentially omniscient and everlasting God is inconsistent with the voluntary character of some human actions has yet to be made out.

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