

A problem for the eternity solution*

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Consider the following *reductio* argument against the compatibility of divine foreknowledge and human freedom:

- (TF) (a) God exists at every moment of time, and is essentially omniscient in the sense that it is logically impossible for him to believe a false proposition, or to fail to believe any true proposition. ‘God’ is a proper name. (Premise)
- (b) Jack mows his lawn at T3, and it was within Jack’s power at T2 to bring it about that he does not mow his lawn at T3. (Premise)
- (G) God believes at T1 that Jack mows his lawn at T3. (By (a) and (b))
- (PRW) If q is a logically necessary condition for p, and q does not obtain, then an agent has it within his power at T to bring it about that p only if he has it within his power at T to bring it about that q. (Here ‘p’ and ‘q’ range over dated states of affairs like the sun is shining at T3, Jack eats lunch at T4, etc.) (Premise)¹
- (c) That it is not the case that God believes at T1 that Jack mows his lawn at T3, is a logically necessary condition for Jack’s not mowing his lawn at T3. (By (a))
- (d) It is within Jack’s power at T2 to bring it about that God does not believe at T1 that Jack mows his lawn at T3. (By (b), (c), (G) and (PRW)).

But the conjunction of (d) and (G) contradicts the intuitive principle that we do not have power over the past.²

* I would like to thank Bill Rowe, Norman Kretzmann, Phil Quinn, Charlotte Katzoff, Tom Morris, and Dale Gottlieb for excellent comments on an earlier version of this paper.

- (PFP) No agent has it within his power at a given time T to bring about the non-obtaining of a fact about the past, relative to T.

We may refer to this principle as ‘the principle of the fixity of the past or simply as “PFP”’. Since this principle is considered to be a conceptual truth,³ it is concluded that divine foreknowledge and human freedom are incompatible.

One well known response to this argument known as the eternity solution (henceforth also referred to as “ES”) denies the assumption that God is a temporal being. According to the eternalist, God exists outside time and is atemporally aware of all events past, present, and future.⁴ Since God is not part of the temporal framework, it is incorrect to describe his existence and beliefs (or knowledge) as dated. Hence, the claim that

- (G) God believes at T1 that Jack will mow his lawn at T3,

is false. In lieu of (G) the eternalist accepts

- (GE) God *knows* (tenselessly) that Jack mows his lawn at T3.^{4a}

Given this amendment of (G), the eternalist is merely committed to

- (d’) It is within Jack’s power at T2 to bring it about that God does not know that Jack mows his lawn at T3,

and hence seems to be able to evade the charge of contravening PFP.

In this paper, I would like to raise a difficulty for the eternalist approach to reconciling divine foreknowledge with human freedom. I shall try to show that insofar as the move of placing God outside time is intended by the eternalist to evade the violation of PFP, this move does not succeed. The eternalist, I shall argue, cannot ultimately avoid the violation of this principle.

I

Before presenting my criticism of ES, I would like to examine first a recent objection to ES advanced by Paul Helm and Alvin Plantinga.⁵ These philosophers argue that although [GE]^{5a} is not a fact about the past, the following fact *is* a past fact:

[GX] *The proposition* that God knows that Jack mows his lawn at T3 was true at T1.

Furthermore, they claim that by restating (TF) with reference to [GX], we may obtain an alternative version of the incompatibilist argument which (i) is consistent with ES, and (ii) whose conclusion

(d'') It is within Jack's power at T2 to bring it about that the *proposition* that God knows that Jack mows his lawn at T3 was not true at T1,

is just as problematic as (d).

Is this objection to ES a crucial one? I do not think so. Notice first that the objection does not depend for its forcefulness on any specific theological assumptions. The move from (GE) to (GX) is, in principle, no different from the move from

(1) Jack mows his lawn at T3

to

(X) *The proposition* that Jack mows his lawn at T3 was true at T1,

a move which is typically employed in one of the standard, non-theological arguments for fatalism. In effect, what the Helm-Plantinga objection shows is that this move can be employed by the fatalist not only to establish the inevitability (relative to T2) of future facts such as that Jack mows his lawn at T3, but also to establish the inevitability of timeless facts like [GE].

Having diagnosed the nature of the Helm-Plantinga objection to ES, it is not difficult to provide a remedy for it. All the eternalist needs to do to evade it is to avail himself of one of the standard responses to non-theological fatalism. One such response questions the very intelligibility of (X) and (GX), on account of their involving tensed ascriptions of truth to propositions. Truth, it is argued, is a property that a proposition has *simpliciter* and not *at a given time*.⁶ Plantinga anticipates this sort of response, but objects that the eternalist's problems are not over yet, since the incompatibilist argument may be restated by replacing (GX) with

(GY) The *sentence* ‘God knows that Jack mows his lawn at T3’ expressed at T1 a true proposition.⁷

Similarly (X) may be replaced with

(Y) The *sentence* ‘Jack mows his lawn at T3’ expressed at T1 a true proposition.

At this point, the eternalist strategy of blocking Plantinga’s objection might be first to state the principle of the fixity of the past more precisely as

(PFP1) If an object X exemplifies a property P at some past time T’, relative to T, then no one has it within his power at T to bring it about that X did not exemplify P at T’,

and then to insist that (Y) or (GY) *need not* be viewed by him as statements which ascribe to an object a property in the past. So for example, the eternalist need not view (Y) as ascribing to ‘Jack mows his lawn at T3’ the property of expressing a true proposition at T1. He need not by accepting (Y) commit himself ontologically to the existence of a property such as that of expressing a true proposition. He may state the truth-condition of (Y) simply in terms of

(Y’) The *sentence* ‘Jack mows his lawn at T3’ expressed at T1 the proposition that Jack mows his lawn at T3, and that proposition is true.⁸

And, as one can easily see, to be able to falsify (Y’), Jack only needs at T2 to have the power to refrain from mowing his lawn at T3, a power the having of which is perfectly consistent with PFP1. Similarly, (GY) also need not be viewed by the eternalist as ascribing to an object a property in the past. Its truth condition may be given in terms of

(GY’) The *sentence* ‘God knows that Jack mows his lawn at T3’ expressed at T1 the proposition that God knows that Jack mows his lawn at T3, and that proposition is true.

And as with (Y’), attributing to Jack at T2 the power to falsify (GY’) does not result in a violation of PFP1.⁹

II

The Helm-Plantinga objection to the eternity solution proved itself to be unconvincing. Still, there is another way by which one can show that the proponent of the eternity view cannot avoid being committed to violating PFP. To see this, consider the following situation.

- (S) Suppose that God knows that Jack freely pulls the trigger at T5, with the intention of killing Smith. Suppose further that wanting to save Smith, God reveals this fact to Smith at T3 by causing him to hear at T3 a voice telling him about what is going to happen. As a result, Smith by taking appropriate precautions is able to save his life.¹⁰

This sort of situation is commonplace in the Judaeo-Christian theological tradition. The Scriptures very often describe God's providential activity in the world as involving his intervening in history in the light of his knowledge of future contingent events. So for example, God appears to Abraham and reveals to him that his descendents will be enslaved and mistreated for four hundred years (Genesis 15:13). He tells Moses that Pharaoh will at first refuse to let the People of Israel go (Exodus 3:19). Knowing that Pharaoh will go in the morning to bathe in the Nile, God orders Moses to meet Pharaoh at the river and to tell him about the first plague (Exodus 14:15). He reveals to the prophet Ahijah that Jeroboam's wife will come to him to consult him about the health of her son, and that she will be coming in disguise (1 Kings 14:5), etc. Notice, however, that the proponent of the eternity solution can allow for the logical possibility of such situations only at the expense of violating PFP. The reason for this is the following. As we have seen from his response to (TF), the eternalist concedes that if Jack has it within his power to refrain from this attempt to kill Smith, he also has the power at T4 to make it the case that God does not know that he attempts to kill Smith at T5. On the other hand, God's knowing that Jack attempts to kill Smith at T5 is a condition which (in the circumstances) causally contributes to the occurrence of the event of Smith's hearing at T3 a voice telling him that Jack will attempt to kill him. It seems plausible to assume that if God had not known that Jack attempts to kill Smith at T5, he would not have told Smith that Jack will try to kill him, and hence, Smith would not have heard the voice, he in fact heard. But then it follows that by having the power to bring about the non-obtaining of that condition, Jack can be also said to have the power at T4

to bring about the non-obtaining of such genuine past facts as:

[XT3] That Smith heard at T3 a voice telling him that Jack will attempt to kill him

[YT3] That Smith came to believe at T3 that Jack will attempt to kill him, etc.

The intuitive principle underlying the last inference is this:

- (i) If p is the case, and q is a causally necessary condition (in the circumstances) for p , and an agent X has it within his power at T to make it the case that ($\text{not-}q$), then X has it also within his power at t to make it the case that ($\text{not-}p$).¹¹

This objection shows that when combined with a certain plausible assumption about the nature of God's providential activity in the world, namely,

- (A1) It is logically possible for God sometimes to intervene in history on the basis of his knowledge of future contingent events,

the eternity view still leads to a violation of PFP or of PFP1.¹²

To evade the above objection the eternalist might try to reject (A1). Such a move, however, would be very problematic. It would commit the eternalist to endorsing at least one of the following claims about the workings of divine providence:

- (a) Necessarily, whenever God intervenes in history on the basis of his knowledge of a certain future event, that event is inevitable.
- (b) Necessarily, whenever God intervenes in history, he never does so *because* of his knowledge of future contingent events, but for some other reason which does not involve such knowledge.

Both these claims are theologically implausible. As for (a), it appears to be at variance with those cases reported in the Scriptures, where God intervenes in the course of events telling a prophet what some agent will do in the future, where the agent is later on punished for that action. This happens for example in Deuteronomy 31:16–19, where God reveals to Moses that after his death the Israelites will break their covenant with God, and that they will be severely punished for this sin. (We have a similar situation in Genesis 15:13–14 and Exodus 3:19–20.) Now if, as (a)

implies, the agent's action is not a free one, the punishment does not seem justified.

Thesis (b) does not fare any better. Note that if, as is suggested by it, God's knowledge of future contingent events does not play any causal or reason-conferring role in his interventions in human affairs, then in the above case of God's telling Moses that the Israelites will break their covenant with Him, we would have to conclude that God might have given this message to Moses, even if the Israelites had refrained from committing that sin. But then God would be telling Moses a lie. Needless to say, it is not difficult to conceive of situations which might be even more morally repugnant than the foregoing.

An adequate solution to the problem of divine foreknowledge and human freedom must not only remove the alleged logical difficulty of reconciling the existence of an essentially omniscient being with human freedom; it must also be theologically acceptable. That is, it must be consistent with the concept of God as expounded by the particular theological tradition within which the problem of divine foreknowledge and human freedom arises, here the Judeo-Christian tradition. As we have seen, the eternity solution, when intended as a strategy for evading the violation of PFP, does not meet this second requirement. When placed in the context of a certain plausible conception of God's providential activity, it again can be shown to fall prey to the objection of contravening PFP. Hence, pending a solution to this difficulty, the eternity solution cannot be considered a satisfactory response to the *theological* problem of reconciling divine knowledge with human freedom.

Notes

1. This principle is an improved version of a principle employed by Richard Taylor in his well known argument for fatalism.

(PRT) No agent can perform any given action if there is lacking at the same, or any other time, some condition or state of affairs necessary for the occurrence of that act.

See his "Fatalism," *The Philosophical Review* 71 (1962):58. Note that (PRW) ought to be distinguished from the following fallacious principle:

(PR) If q is a logically necessary condition for p, then an agent has it within this power at T to bring it about that p only if he has it within his power at T to bring it about that q.

The mere fact that *q* is a necessary condition for *p* does not imply that my power to bring it about that *p* is contingent upon my power to bring it about that *q*. I may have the power to bring it about that *p*, even if I lack the power to bring it about that *q* in situations where *q* is already in existence or will be in existence anyway. E.g., provided I did not smoke a cigarette until T5, I may have the power at T4 to smoke a cigarette for the first time at T5, and this even though I do not have at T4 the power to bring it about that I did not smoke a cigarette in the past. Or given that the sun will be shining at T3, I may have the power at T2 to bring it about that I raise my arm at T3 while the sun is shining, although I do not have the power at T2 to bring it about that the sun will be shining at T3. For similar counter-examples to (PR), see Joshua Hoffman and Gary Rosenkrantz, "On Divine Foreknowledge and Human Freedom," *Philosophical Studies* 37 (1980):292–293. I discuss the relation between (PRW) and (PR) also in my "Two Forms of Fatalism" in John Fischer (ed.) *God, Freedom and Knowledge* (Stanford University Press, 1989).

2. This argument is a version of a similar argument formulated by Nelson Pike in his "Divine Omniscience and Voluntary Action," *The Philosophical Review* 74 (1965):31–35. Its advantage over Pike's version consists in the fact that it precisely spells out the move from (i) Jack's having it within his power at T2 to bring it about that he does not mow his lawn at T3, to (ii) his having the power at T2 to bring it about that God did not believe at T1 that Jack mows his lawn at T3.
3. This is how it is treated, for example, by Aquinas *Summa Theologiae* Part I Question 14 Article 13 Objection 2; by Jonathan Edwards *The Freedom of the Will* Section 12, and by Pike, *op. cit.*, p. 33.
4. Classical proponents of this view are Boethius and Aquinas. See Boethius *Consolation of Philosophy* Book 5 sec. 4–6, and St. Thomas Aquinas *Summa Theologiae* Part I Question 10. Among modern expounders of the eternity view we may find Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann, "Eternity," *The Journal of Philosophy* 78 (1981):429–458, and William Hasker, "Concerning the Intelligibility of 'God is Timeless'" *New Scholasticism* 57 (1983):170–195.
- 4a. Here, as well as, in what follows I shall use 'God knows' to stand either for 'God is atemporally aware...' or for 'God (qua essentially omniscient) believes atemporally...'
5. Paul Helm, "Timelessness and Foreknowledge," *Mind* 84 (1975):524–527, and Alvin Plantinga, "On Ockham's Way Out," *Faith and Philosophy* 3 (1986):239–40.
- 5a. Here I am using '[GE]' and '[GX]' to denote the facts expressed by the statements (GE) and (GX).
6. See for example, A.J. Ayer "Fatalism" in *The Concept of a Person* (London: Macmillan, 1963), p. 237, and most recently Peter Van Inwagen, *An Essay on Free Will* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 42.
7. Plantinga, "On Ockham's Way Out," *op. cit.*, p. 240.
8. This way of eschewing ontological commitment to the existence of the property of expressing a true proposition raises the more general question which predicates do and which do not denote genuine properties. On this issue, see David Armstrong's *A Theory of Universals Vol. II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), chap. 13–18; and Sydney Shoemaker's

“Causality and Properties” in Peter van Inwagen (ed.) *Time and Cause* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1980), pp. 109–135.

9. Another way of blocking the non-theological argument for fatalism is to restrict the range of application of PFP to *hard* facts about the past, and then to maintain that a fact such as [X] is a *soft* fact about the past. Roughly speaking, a hard fact about the past (as opposed to a soft fact), relative to a time T, is one which may be deemed fully accomplished and over-and-done-with at T. Applying this idea, the eternalist may counter the Helm-Plantinga objection by treating [GX] as a soft fact about the past, relative to T2.
10. Note that the proponent of the eternity solution can admit the possibility that a timeless God may intervene in human history at time T, without this committing him to the absurd consequence that God exists in time. He may construe ‘God *qua* timeless intervenes in history at time T’ in the sense that God, *qua* existing outside time, acts in such a way that one of the temporal effects of his action occurs at T, or in the sense that some action of His which in itself is timeless causes an event which occurs at T. See Stump and Kretzmann, “Eternity,” *op. cit.*, pp. 447–448, and Hasker “Concerning the Intelligibility of ‘God is Timeless’ ”, *op. cit.*, pp. 180–182.
11. I employ a similar argument for a different purpose in my “Two Forms of Fatalism”, *op. cit.*
12. A more precise formulation of (A1) which does not give one the impression that a timeless God conceives of certain events as *future*, is the following:

(A1) it is logically possible that God because of his knowledge of some agent’s free action A occurring at a time T, intervenes in history by causing (atemporally) an event E which occurs prior to T.

Note that God’s interventions in human affairs based on his knowledge of future contingent events need not be restricted to prophecies. The objection in the text could also be stated by considering a situation in which God, instead of warning Smith, causes Jack’s forefinger to be paralysed at T3, unbeknown to Jack.