

DISCUSSIONS

DIVINE FOREKNOWLEDGE, HUMAN FREEDOM AND POSSIBLE WORLDS

NELSON PIKE

IN an article published some time ago in the *Philosophical Review* entitled "Divine Omniscience and Voluntary Action,"¹ I argued that if God exists and the right collection of theological assumptions concerning his nature are true, no human action is free. Of central importance in the collection of assumptions is the doctrine of essential omniscience. If God exists at a given time and holds infallible beliefs concerning what human agents will do in the future relative to that time, then the actions of those agents are not free. In Part I, section B of his recent book *God, Freedom and Evil*,² Alvin Plantinga contends that the argument I offered in that earlier paper for this thesis is mistaken and that there is no good reason for thinking that God's foreknowledge of future actions has any implications as regards human freedom. Plantinga approaches the problem using the conceptual apparatus of possible worlds ontology. He obviously thinks that this approach provides a clearer look at the issues than has hitherto been available. In this brief paper I want to join with Plantinga in working through the traditional problem of divine foreknowledge from this point of view. Though the conclusion I shall reach is the same as it was in my earlier publication, perhaps this alternative way of formulating the argument will provide fruitful perspective.

I

A being counts as omniscient just in case (1) that being believes all true propositions; and (2) that being believes no propositions that are false. Assume that God is essentially omniscient. This is to say (using the vocabulary of possible worlds) that God possesses the attribute of omniscience in every possible world in which he exists.

¹ *Philosophical Review*, January 1965.

² New York, Harper and Row (Torchbook Series), 1974.

It follows that in every possible world in which God exists, if a proposition P is true, God believes that P is true, and if God believes that P is true, P is true. Grant, secondly, that God is a being who is everlasting, that is, a being whose life extends indefinitely both forwards and backwards in time. For any time T , God exists at T . Allow, finally, that God's beliefs do not change from time to time. Anything that God believes at one time is something that he believes at all times. Now suppose that some individual, Jones, performs an action X at a particular time T_2 —for example, Jones goes for a walk on the beach on Friday afternoon. If God exists, it follows that God believes that Jones does X at T_2 . Since for any given time, there is a prior time at which God exists, it also follows that at a time prior to T_2 (call it T_1) God believed that Jones would do X at T_2 . What I argued in my earlier paper (and again in the fourth chapter of my book *God and Timelessness*)³ is that under the circumstances just imagined, it is not within Jones' power at T_2 to refrain from doing X . But if we assume that a free action is such that it is within the agent's power to refrain from its performance, we must conclude that Jones' doing X at T_2 is not a free action. Since this argument can be generalized for all human agents and for all times, it follows that if God exists and is everlasting and essentially omniscient, no human action is free.

Of course, the crux of this argument rests on the claim that if God believes at T_1 that Jones will do X at T_2 , it is *not within Jones' power* at T_2 to refrain from doing X . Plantinga sketches my earlier argument for this contention as follows:

Consider

- (51) God existed at T_1 , and God believed at T_1 that Jones would do X at T_2 and it was within Jones' power to refrain from doing X at T_2

What Pike means to say, I believe, is that either (51) entails

- (52) It was within Jones' power at T_2 to do something that would have brought it about that God held a false belief at T_1

or (51) entails

- (53) It was within Jones' power at T_2 to do something that would have brought it about that God did not hold the belief he did hold at T_1

or it entails

- (54) It was within Jones' power at T_2 to do something that would have

³ New York, Schocken Books, 1970.

brought it about that anyone who believed at T_1 that Jones would do X at T_2 (one of whom was by hypothesis God) held a false belief and thus was not God—that is, that God (who by hypothesis existed at T_1) did not exist at T_1 .

The remainder to Pike's reasoning consists in arguing that each of (52), (53) and (54) is necessarily false, if God is essentially omniscient; hence (51) is necessarily false, if God is essentially omniscient, which means that God's being essentially omniscient is incompatible with human freedom.

That (51) entails either (52), (53) or (54)⁴ is something that I asserted but did not argue in my earlier publications. What I said was that (52), (53) and (54) are the only alternatives I could think of if (51) is assumed. The rest of the argument is relatively straightforward. (52) is necessarily false if God is essentially omniscient since there is no possible world in which an essentially omniscient being holds a false belief. (53) and (54) are necessarily false as well. Whether or not it is logically possible for some event in the present to determine some circumstance in the past, it is not within the power of a human being so to act at a given time that a belief held prior to that time was not held prior to that time or that a being (person) who existed prior to that time did not exist prior to that time. This I take to be a conceptual truth.

In his criticism of the argument just sketched, Plantinga invites us to consider once again the logical relations between (51) on the one hand, and each of (52), (53) and (54) on the other hand. Taking each of the latter one at a time, Plantinga asks first: "Does (51) entail (52)?" His answer is "No". He goes on:

(52) says that it was within Jones' power to do something—namely refrain from doing x —such that if he had done that thing, then God *would have* held a false belief at T_1 . But this does not follow from (51). If Jones had refrained from X , then a proposition that God *did in fact* believe would have been false; but if Jones had refrained from X at T_2 , then God (since he is omniscient) *would not have believed at T_1* that Jones will do X at T_2 —indeed, He would have held the true belief that Jones *will refrain* from doing X at T_2 . What follows from (51) is not (52) but only (52'):

⁴ In the passage just quoted, Plantinga talks of a disjunction of conditionals. (51) entails (52) or (51) entails (53) or (51) entails (54). My original formulation was intended as a conditional having a disjunctive consequent: (51) entails either (52) or (53) or (54). This difference, however, will not matter in the present discussion.

(52') It was within Jones' power to do something such that if he had done it, then a belief that God did hold at T_1 would have been false. But (52') is not at all paradoxical and in particular does not imply that it was within Jones' power to do something that would have brought it about that God held a false belief.

It is at this point that Plantinga offers a look at the problem from what he calls "the vantage point of possible worlds". What follows is the same point made in the passage just cited but framed in the language of possible worlds ontology:

We are told by (51) both that in the actual world God believes that Jones does X at T_2 and also that it is within Jones' power to *refrain* from doing X at T_2 . Now consider any world W in which Jones *does* refrain from doing X . In *that* world, a belief that God holds in the actual world—in Kronos—is false. That is, if W had been actual, then a belief that God does *in fact* hold would have been false. But it does not follow that in W God holds a false belief. For it doesn't follow that if W had been actual, God would have believed that Jones would do X at T_2 . Indeed, if God is essentially omniscient (omniscient in every world in which He exists) what follows is that in W God did *not* believe at T_1 that Jones will do X at T_2 ; He believed instead that Jones will *refrain* from X . So (51) by no means implies that it was within Jones' power to bring it about that God held a false belief at T_1 .

Plantinga then extends the same pattern of reasoning in an effort to show that neither (53) nor (54) is entailed by (51). Consider a world W in which Jones exercises the power assigned to him in (51), that is, refrains from doing X . This is not a world in which Jones so acts as to make it the case that a belief held by God at T_1 is not held by God at T_1 nor is it a world in which Jones so acts as to bring it about that a being (person) who existed at T_1 did not exist at T_1 . We can assume that God exists at T_1 in W and that He holds a belief at T_1 concerning Jones' action at T_2 . All we need add is that in W , God does not hold the *same* belief that he holds in the actual world. In W , God believes that Jones refrains from doing X . Thus (51) entails nothing that is in the least strange or awkward. If God exists at T_1 and believes at T_1 that Jones will do X at T_2 , Jones may still have the power at T_2 to refrain from doing X . To say that Jones has such power is simply to say that there is a possible world W in which he refrains from doing X at T_2 . This, of course, is a world in which God does not believe that Jones does X at T_2 .

II

Given any possible world in which God exists and is everlasting and essentially omniscient, if Jones does X at T_2 , God believes at T_1 that Jones does X at T_2 ; and if Jones refrains from doing X at T_2 , God believes at T_1 that Jones refrains from doing X at T_2 . So much is clear and quite beyond dispute. The question of interest, however, does not concern these straightforward and uncomplicated implications of the doctrine of essential omniscience. Of primary concern is the value to be assigned to the claim that it is *within Jones' power* at T_2 to refrain from doing X even though, in fact, he does X at T_2 . Let's look at this idea in a bit more detail.

What is it to say of a given agent, Jones, that it is within his power to do X ? Plantinga apparently thinks that a statement of this sort can be analyzed in terms of possible worlds. What it means, so he seems to be supposing, is that there is some possible world in which Jones does X . In the special case in which Jones does not do X (that is, does not exercise his power to do X) what we say is that in the actual world Jones does not do X , but in some other possible world Jones does X . This, however, is clearly wrong if it is meant as a complete analysis. If the statement "It is within Jones' power to do X " means "There is a possible world in which Jones does X ", then its negation "It is not the case that it is within Jones' power to do X " would have to mean "It is not the case that there is a possible world in which Jones does X ". This last, of course, is absurd. Though it is not within my power to jump over a ten foot fence, there is some possible world in which I do just that. That I jump over the fence is a logical possibility; it is just that it is not within my power to do it.

Let's start again.

What does it mean to say that it is not within one's power to perform a certain action? If I were called upon to justify the claim that it is not within my power to jump the fence, I would probably make mention of the physical condition of my body (for example, the length and strength of my legs), principles governing the behavior of bodies generally (for example, the law of gravity) and the like. The original claim thus presupposes that such conditions

obtain. And if this is right, then if we are to analyze the original, we shall have to make clear in the analysis that these conditions are so presupposed. Such an analysis would have the following form:

Given physical conditions *C1*, *C2*, *C3*, and so on, it is not possible for me to jump the fence, that is, it is not within my power to jump the fence.

Could an analysis of this form be cast in the language of possible worlds? It could if we could assume that the notion of possibility therein employed is logical possibility. Since Plantinga proceeds making use of this assumption, let's agree for purposes of discussion. The resulting form of the analysis is then:

Within the subset of possible worlds in which obtain conditions *C1*, *C2*, *C3*, and so on there is no possible world in which I jump the fence.

The point I mean to be emphasizing here is this: The claim that it is not within my power to perform a certain action is not a claim about *all* possible worlds. If it is a claim about possible worlds at all, it is one that is restricted in scope to a subset of possible worlds that share a certain set of conditions in common. The conditions in question are conditions that obtain in the *actual* world. This point has a corollary with respect to sentences in which it is affirmed that a certain action *is* within the power of a given agent. If I say that it is within my power to jump the fence, this is not *simply* to say that there is a possible world in which I do so. Surely anyone who challenged the original would find it something of a joke to be told that my jumping the fence is within my power because my jumping the fence is a logical possibility. Both the claim that it is and the claim that it is not within my power to perform a certain action are radically fact-infested. If such claims can be analyzed using the notion of logical possibility at all, the significance of the original will require that the logical possibility

be affirmed only in conjunction with a set of relevant conditions that obtain in the actual world.⁵

Among the circumstances in the actual world that help to determine what is and what is not within my power at a given time are those that obtained in the past relative to the time in question. Yesterday was Friday. I wore a blue shirt. Today it is within my power to wear a red shirt, but it is not (today) within my power to wear (or to have worn) a red shirt on Friday. Cast in the language of possible worlds, this is to say: (1) Among the possible worlds that share in common with the actual world my wearing a blue shirt on Friday (and some other features such as my having a red shirt in the closet), there is one in which I wear a red shirt on Saturday; and (2) Among the possible worlds that share in common with the actual world my wearing a blue shirt on Friday (the other conditions might also be mentioned) there is no world in which I wear a red shirt on Friday. Of course, this last is not to deny that there is *some* possible in which I wear a red shirt on Friday. That I wear (or wore) a red shirt on Friday is not a logical impossibility. The point is, however, that I act in a context conditioned by actualities not just logical possibilities. When assessing what is within my power at a given moment, I must take into account the way things are and the way things have been in the past. If we assume that what is within my power at a given moment determines a set of possible worlds, all of the members of that set will have to be worlds in which what has happened in the past relative to the given moment is precisely what has happened in the past relative to that moment in the actual world.

Going back now to the original problem, we have assumed that Jones does *X* at *T*₂ and the God exists and is everlasting and essentially omniscient. It follows that God believes at *T*₁ and Jones does *X* at *T*₂. The question before us is whether it is within Jones' power at *T*₂ to refrain from doing *X*. Plantinga assumes that this is to ask whether there is a possible world in which Jones refrains from doing *X* at *T*₂. His answer is that there is—it is a world

⁵ I am here disregarding the special (and I think uninteresting) cases in which the description of what is or is not within my power is either analytic or contradictory, e.g. "It is (or is not) within my power to either run or not run" and "It is (or is not) within my power to both run and not run at the same time."

in which God does not believe at $T1$ that Jones does X at $T2$. But Plantinga has not formulated the question correctly. He has not taken account of the restrictions that must be respected if one is to employ a possible worlds analysis of what it is for something to be within one's power. The question is not whether there is just some possible world or other in which Jones refrains from doing X at $T2$. What must be asked is whether there is a possible world, *having a history prior to $T2$ that is indistinguishable from that of the actual world*, in which Jones refrains from doing X at $T2$. The answer is that there is not. All such worlds contain an essentially omniscient being who believes at $T1$ that Jones does X at $T2$. There is no possible world of *this* description in which Jones refrains from doing X at $T2$.⁶

University of California, Irvine

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