

Divine guidance and an accidentally necessary future: a response to Hunt

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Abstract: In his reply to my original essay, David Hunt maintains that I do not discuss how his defence of providentially useful simple foreknowledge violates the Metaphysical Principle. Further, he claims that I try to force him into both affirming and denying the accidental necessity of future events and their role in explaining divine advice-giving. In this response, I attempt to articulate more fully why Hunt's defence of simple foreknowledge implies that dependency loops could unfold. Further, I argue that Hunt's scenario is not tenable, whether one affirms that future events are accidentally necessary or contingent.

In my original essay, I argue that David P. Hunt's scenario (his case for the utility of simple foreknowledge for divine providence) violates the Metaphysical Principle. This principle essentially states that dependency loops are impossible. For example, it cannot be the case that some prior divine advice A depends on some future event E while that same event E depends on the prior divine advice A. I argue that Hunt's scenario implies that such a state of affairs could occur and, thus, contradicts the Metaphysical Principle.

In his reply to that essay, Hunt contends that I fail to show explicitly how his scenario implies that such a state of affairs could unfold and, hence, fail to show that his perspective violates the Metaphysical Principle. Further, he argues that the limited reasoning that I employ to render this conclusion seems to be invalid. Finally, Hunt insists that I try to force him into an untenable dilemma of both affirming and denying the accidental necessity of some future event E and its role in explaining God's earlier advice A. But Hunt denies that this is the case, insisting that his scenario can be interpreted either as affirming the accidental necessity of E and its explanatory role, or denying the accidental necessity of E and its explanatory role, but not both.

In response, let me first more fully express why I think *prima facie* Hunt's scenario implies (or at least asserts) that dependency loops could occur.

Assuming with Hunt that E is an event that occurs at time T_3 , and A is a divine action (advice) performed at T_2 (where T_2 precedes T_3), and K is God's knowing at T_1 (where T_1 precedes T_2) that E will occur at T_3 , among other claims, Hunt's scenario declares that:

- (i) K is explanatorily dependent on E;
- (ii) A is explanatorily dependent on K; and
- (iii) E's occurrence at T_3 is, at T_2 , still causally contingent.¹

For simplicity, through chain reasoning, let us deduce from (i) and (ii) the following claim:

- (i–ii) A is explanatorily dependent on E.

Obviously, such a claim affirms that some prior divine action (advice) A depends on some future event E. In turn, (iii) seems to imply that some future event E could depend on a prior divine action (advice) A. This seems to be the natural reading of the assertion that E's occurrence is causally contingent prior to its actualization. If E is in A's light cone, and if E's occurrence (prior to its actualization) is contingent, then E potentially could causally/explanatorily depend on A. As Hunt notes, it is hard to understand what cosmic police officer might keep this from happening. The end result of all this is that, *prima facie*, a straightforward reading of Hunt's scenario is that it is asserting that possibly a prior divine advice A depends on a future event E, while the future event E depends upon the divine advice A.

Of course, to say that such an assertion is a natural reading of Hunt's scenario is not to say that such a claim is coherent. Indeed, I believe that it is not. I wholeheartedly agree with Hunt that any attempt to show that such a claim is coherent is doomed to failure. That is, I agree that it is invalid to argue:

- (1) There is a possible world in which A is explanatorily dependent on K and K is explanatorily dependent on E.
- (2) There is a possible world in which E is explanatorily dependent on A.

Therefore,

- (3) There is a possible world in which A is explanatorily dependent on K, K is explanatorily dependent on E, and E is explanatorily dependent on A.²

Rather, I am only contending that a *prima facie* reading of The Scenario seems to endorse the truth of (3). In turn, the invalidity of (1)–(3) only helps reinforce the point that I have been trying to make all along – namely, that a straightforward reading of Hunt's scenario is not coherent; it violates the Metaphysical Principle. Another way to say this is that assertion (i–ii) of Hunt's scenario is not logically consistent with the implications of his proposition (iii).

Now interestingly enough, in his reply to my original essay, Hunt seems to concede that if his scenario affirms (3), The Scenario is not coherent. That is, he agrees that it is impossible for A to depend on E while E depends on A. In light of this, Hunt proposes two strategies by which his scenario might avoid conflict with the Metaphysical Principle. He contends that his scenario can be interpreted either (A) as affirming the accidental necessity of E and its explanatory role upon A, or (B) denying the accidental necessity of E and its explanatory role, but not both. Regarding this, Hunt maintains that whichever of these interpretations of The Scenario one affirms, conflict with the Metaphysical Principle is avoided. If one assumes (A) that E and its explanatory role are accidentally necessary, then it is necessary that the prior divine advice A not help bring about E. But if one assumes (B) that E and its explanatory role are not accidentally necessary, then it may be possible for A to help bring about E. This is the case because under such circumstances, it likewise would be possible for A not to be explained by E.³

Admittedly, each of these interpretations of Hunt's scenario avoids conflict with the Metaphysical Principle. In defence of my original position, I can only say that a cursory reading of Hunt's original scenario does not make these interpretations plain. Indeed, in a moment I will argue that each interpretation requires Hunt to reject some portion – (i)–(ii) or (iii) – of his original scenario. More importantly, however, it is less than clear that either of these interpretations is rationally tenable. First, each strategy requires a denial of some aspect of our intuitive understanding of accidental necessity. Typically, accidental necessity is understood as the necessity that attaches to an event once it has happened or while it is happening. Consequently, it is often thought that events of the past and present are now accidentally necessary, but events of the future are not. But Hunt's strategy (A) runs contrary to the common notion that the future is not accidentally necessary. And strategy (B) contradicts the idea that the past is accidentally necessary. Therefore, it is less than clear that either of these interpretations makes sense.⁴

Now, of Hunt's two interpretations, I must declare that the least plausible is (B). I simply cannot see how once God's advice A is based on some future event E that A somehow can fail to be based on E. While some argument could be made for my perspective, in the end, it likely boils down to intuition. At very least, I can take comfort that others share this intuition, including Hunt.⁵ In light of my intuition, I will not consider (B) to be a viable option.

But what about interpretation A? Specifically, what about the claim that the future is accidentally necessary? Let us consider this question: why is the future accidentally necessary? As remarked in my original essay, one (not particularly plausible) causal story is that God's knowledge of a future event E somehow causes E to be accidentally necessary. But if this were so, my original argumentation holds, namely that an implicit violation of the Metaphysical Principle unfolds. In such circumstances, the divine knowledge of a future event E depends

on the occurrence of E while the occurrence of E depends upon the divine knowledge of it. An impossible dependency loop is implied.

But perhaps there is another causal story about the future. Perhaps, contrary to our typical thinking about it, the future simply intrinsically is accidentally necessary. In some sense, the future is 'already' played out, already actualized. Here my original article may miss the mark. In that essay, I essentially argue that if the future is only accidentally necessary, then it remains possible in some absolute sense that God's prior advice A could affect some future event E which in turn originally affected God's advice. However, in his response, Hunt seems to say that such a detail is irrelevant. What is critical for enabling his scenario to avoid the Metaphysical Principle is not that the future be absolutely necessary, but only that it be necessary in some sense, including accidental necessity. Perhaps Hunt is correct here. Maybe the intrinsic accidental necessity of the future would allow his scenario to avoid impossible explanatory loops.

But I think a hefty and unwanted price must be paid for claiming that the future is intrinsically accidentally necessary. Several points might be made, but let me focus on this one. The accidental necessity of the future would undermine the divine rationale for giving advice. Typically, we assume that advice can be heeded or ignored. But if the future is accidentally necessary, it does not seem that the advisee can either heed or rebuff prior advice given. To see this, consider the analogous attempt to advise someone about some past event. Imagine an advisor saying: 'It was unwise that you jumped from that moving car, so don't have done it!' Or again, if someone has done something sapient in the past, it makes little sense to advise her to have done it. In each case, offering advice is unreasonable, for the agent cannot heed the advice given. In the first situation, the advisee cannot perform the action advised. In the second case, the advisee cannot not do what is advised. And in both circumstances, the advisee cannot act as a reaction to the advice given. Even if the counsellor does not know what the advisee has done in the past, offering advice about the past would not be sensible. It hardly would be reasonable to propose: 'I don't know what you did yesterday, but I counsel you not to have jumped from the car'. Such advice could not be acted upon. Why? Whatever the advisee did is now accidentally necessary. In an analogous way, it seems unreasonable to advise someone to do or not do some accidentally necessary future action. In some sense, the event already is, and cannot be otherwise.

At this point, the pro-Huntian may contend that there is an important difference between events of the past and events of the future. This difference is that present occurrences can affect the future, but not the past. That is, the 'arrow' of time runs from present to future, but not from present to past. Hence, even if both the past and the future are accidentally necessary, the 'arrow' of time makes it unreasonable to offer counsel about the past, but not unreasonable to offer guidance concerning the future. Such claims have an intuitive appeal. But we

need to be cautious. Why does the 'arrow' of time run one way? It would be incorrect to assert that past and present events are causally disconnected. If this were the case, the past would not help cause the present. Further, anyone who has seen a film run 'backwards' can imagine what it would be like for present events causally to generate a series of events that duplicates the events of the past in reverse order. Interestingly, however, even if we were to witness this, many would not want to say that time has run backwards, that the present is bringing about the past. Rather, many would propose that a set of present events generates a set of future events that copy the past in reverse order. In other words, we would not say that the past has been undone and, thus, never occurred. But why? Why not claim that the past is being caused not to have happened? A reasonable answer, it seems to me, is that the past is accidentally necessary. Once it has occurred, the past cannot fail to have occurred, even if a current set of events were to 'duplicate' it in reverse order. In short, our intuitions concerning the 'arrow' of time seem to be grounded on the idea of accidental necessity.

But if the future also is accidentally necessary, then the notion of an 'arrow' of time disintegrates. There is no causal flow from past to present to future any more than there is causal flow from future to present to past. Rather, all events – past, present, and future – simply are. Each is as metaphysically basic as the others. And none is causally dependent on the others. At least, it seems to me that this is the best model for conceptualizing the accidental necessity of past, present and future. In such circumstances, present advice can no more help cause future actions than it can cause the past. In turn, if present advice has no causal influence on the future, Hunt's project of showing divine simple foreknowledge to be useful to providential guidance is negated. In sum, it is less than clear that either of Hunt's interpretations of The Scenario is rationally tenable.

A further point to ponder: As briefly remarked above, I believe that each of Hunt's interpretations requires him to reject some portion – (i)–(ii) or (iii) – of his original scenario. Strategy B (which denies that E and its explanatory role are accidentally necessary) requires rejecting the claim that at the time of A's occurrence (i)–(ii), A is explanatorily dependent on E. Rather, somehow, even though A has happened and depends on E, it is possible that A not depend on E. This is a strange claim, and one that I have already rejected. In turn, strategy A (which affirms that E and its explanatory role are accidentally necessary) involves denying (iii) that future event E is causally contingent until it actualizes. Rather, E and the causal chain leading up to it somehow are necessary prior to E's occurrence. Somehow, they are accidentally necessary prior to E's obtaining. In short, to affirm either of these interpretations of The Scenario seems to necessitate a rejection of some element of Hunt's original model.

In conclusion, let me augment as follows my original claim that Hunt's scenario violates the Metaphysical Principle: In order to avoid conflict with the standard understanding of accidental necessity, and in order to maintain both propositions

(i)–(ii) and (iii) of the original scenario, Hunt must affirm a version of The Scenario that violates the Metaphysical Principle. Furthermore, those interpretations of The Scenario that avoid conflict with the Metaphysical Principle do so only by denying some central aspect of the typical understanding of accidental necessity, and it is not clear that this is sensible. Further still, the most feasible of these interpretations – namely A – undermines the rationale for divine advice-giving – that is the attempt to causally influence the future.

Notes

1. David Hunt, 'Providence, foreknowledge, and explanatory loops: a reply to Robinson', *Religious Studies*, 40 (2004), 485–491, 486.
2. *Ibid.*, 487.
3. *Ibid.*, 490.
4. In more cynical moments, one wonders if adversaries of foreknowledge see advocates of foreknowledge (including me) as engaged in a nonsense game such as: 'Let us pretend that simple foreknowledge is possible. What impossible situation must we affirm as possible in order to claim that foreknowledge is possible?' Further, it is not clear that Hunt's two interpretations are the only ways foreknowledge might be interpreted. A few supporters of foreknowledge have suggested that, in a certain sense, future events might be both accidentally necessary and not accidentally necessary, depending on one's frame of reference. From the divine atemporal perspective, the future events are accidentally necessary, but in a given creaturely temporal frame of reference those events are not accidentally necessary. See Brian Leftow *Time and Eternity* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), 216–245, and Michael D. Robinson *Eternity and Freedom* (Lanham MD: University Press of America, 1995), 128–133.
5. David Hunt 'The simple-foreknowledge view', in James Beilby & Paul Eddy (eds) *Divine Foreknowledge: Four Views* (Downers Grove IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 82–86.