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Providence, foreknowledge, and explanatory loops: a reply to Robinson

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Abstract: **In a number of earlier papers I have attempted to defend the providential utility of simple foreknowledge as a *via media* between the accounts of divine providence offered by Molinists, on the one hand, and 'open theists', on the other. In the current issue of this journal, Michael Robinson argues that my response to one of the standard difficulties for simple foreknowledge – that its providential employment would generate explanatory loops – is inadequate. In the following paper I answer Robinson's charge.**

In the paper to which Michael Robinson is responding in this issue,[1] I undertook to rehabilitate a moderate position on divine foreknowledge in the face of attacks from two increasingly popular extremes. Both Molinists and open theists agree that a simple foreknowledge of future contingents is, by itself, providentially useless to God; they differ in that open theists take this as (one) reason to reject divine knowledge of future contingents, while Molinists take it as (one) reason to supplement God's simple foreknowledge with the providentially richer resources of middle knowledge. It seemed to me then, as it does now, that this push to promote Molinism and open theism as the principal live options, with simple foreknowledge squeezed out of the debate, should be resisted on both logical and theological grounds. Limiting the contest to these two players is *theologically* inadvisable, since middle knowledge is of debatable coherence while open theism is of questionable orthodoxy. And excluding simple foreknowledge from the playing field is *logically* premature, since the cited grounds for this exclusion are far from conclusive.

In defending simple foreknowledge, I distinguished two sorts of worries raised by critics, which I denominated the *Metaphysical Problem* and the *Doxastic Problem*. Each problem concerns an apparently apodeictic principle that the providential employment of divine foreknowledge is supposed to violate. In the case of the Doxastic Problem, I argued that the principle in question – the *Doxastic Principle*, as I termed it – is in fact false, despite its seductive allure. This problem,

then, rests on an illusion.[2] But in the case of the Metaphysical Problem – the problem on which Robinson focuses in his present paper – I took a different tack. I chose here to concede, at least for the sake of argument, the truth of the relevant *Metaphysical Principle*:

> MP It is impossible that a decision depend on a belief which depends on a future event which depends on the original decision.

The task I set myself was to explain how God might make (at least) some providential use out of simple foreknowledge *despite* the (presumed) truth of MP. I ended up proposing a scenario – let's call it simply *The Scenario* – in which God puts His simple foreknowledge to providential use without generating the sort of causal/explanatory loop ruled out by MP. Or so I claimed.

Let E be an event occurring at a time T_3; let A be a divine action performed at T_2 ($T_2 < T_3$); and let K be God's knowing at T_1 ($T_1 \leq T_2$) that E will occur at T_3. Then God is making providential use of His simple foreknowledge when the following conditions are satisfied:

(i) K is explanatorily dependent on E;
(ii) A is explanatorily dependent on K;
(iii) E's occurrence at T_3 is, at T_2, still causally contingent; and
(iv) God's possession of K at T_1 'enhances His providential control'.

(Without prejudice to other ways in which the vague phrase in quotes might be satisfied, let the following serve as at least one important way: some divine end is such that it is more likely to be furthered by an initiative, like A, that is undertaken in light of a body of knowledge which includes K, than by an initiative informed by the same body of knowledge but lacking K.)

Now The Scenario simply adds to (i)–(iv) the requirement that:

(v) The event E, foreknowledge of which informs God's act of providential intervention A, is not in fact explanatorily dependent on A.

An example might be God's advising an underground church leader on Monday to flee the country, where this advice is based on God's foreknowledge that the authorities will decide on Wednesday to order the leader's arrest, and where the actual consequences of this advice (e.g. the leader's leaving the country on Tuesday and all this implies, in the case where he follows the divine leading) do not bring about or explain the future arrest order. This example – assuming that further details of the case, as they emerge, continue to satisfy conditions (i)–(v) – would appear to constitute a paradigmatic instance of The Scenario.

Robinson's basic objection to my position can now be stated. It is really quite simple. Robinson is prepared to agree, at least for the sake of argument, that The

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Scenario does not involve any actual loop of the sort proscribed by MP, and that cases which purportedly avoid such loops, like that of the forewarned church leader in the preceding paragraph, are indeed possible. He points out, however, that MP does not merely require the *nonexistence* of such loops; it requires their *impossibility*. But The Scenario, while satisfying the nonexistence requirement, does not satisfy the impossibility requirement. Indeed, Robinson claims that The Scenario 'seems to allow' (473), 'seems to imply' (473), 'implies' [*simpliciter*] (474), 'intimates' (476), and 'insinuates' (482) that such loops *are* possible. But then The Scenario violates MP after all.

The bulk of Robinson's paper is devoted to anticipating and checking various moves by which I might try to avoid being boxed into this corner. I will have nothing to say about Robinson's detailed arguments on this score because I'm not convinced that being in this corner is anything to worry about.

Is it true that The Scenario 'allows', 'implies', etc. the possibility of an invidious loop? Robinson does not explain why he thinks that this is even prima facie the case. But some explanation is surely in order; after all, if MP *is* true, as we are assuming it to be, then we have the best reason in the world for believing that The Scenario does *not* countenance the possibility of causal loops, since the truth of MP ensures their impossibility.

Robinson does, to be sure, appeal to the reader's intuitions that, e.g. God's advising Larry to marry Lucy is the sort of thing that *could* contribute causally to Linda's falling in love with Lucas. Indeed, the storylines he offers, in which God's advice does contribute to this very result (by deflecting Linda from her interest in Larry), are entirely possible. But this possibility is not ruled out by MP. What MP *does* proscribe is the possibility that God's advice to Larry should contribute causally to Linda's falling in love with Lucas *when God's knowledge of the latter helps explain why He gave Larry that advice in the first place*. I see no reason to agree that The Scenario 'implies' or even 'intimates' that *this* situation is possible, nor do I see where Robinson shows that it does.

Let's look at Robinson's charge a bit more carefully. He wants to show that anyone who allows that The Scenario describes a possible way things might go is thereby committed to the possibility of causal/explanatory loops of the sort proscribed by MP. In particular, Robinson's claim is that, once we concede that The Scenario is possible, we're stuck with:

> (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.

Since (3) is ruled out by MP, and both sides are accepting MP for the sake of argument, The Scenario must be rejected.

But how is (3) supposed to follow from The Scenario? The most I can find in Robinson's paper by way of an argument for this claim is the following.

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Obviously, if The Scenario is possible, then,

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

Moreover, if there are possible worlds in which A obtains, there are surely possible worlds in which A makes some explanatory or causal contribution to E. (There is nothing about the kind of thing A is, and the kind of thing E is, that would preclude their being causally or explanatorily related; and since E stands in A's light-cone, they are favourably situated for this possibility to be realized.) But if The Scenario is possible, there *are* possible worlds in which A obtains. Therefore, if The Scenario is possible, then

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

As I said, if Robinson has any grounds for (3), other than (1) and (2), I don't know what they are.

But if these are his grounds, they are obviously inadequate. (3) does not follow from (1) and (2), any more than

(3′) There is a possible world in which James weds and James never weds,

follows from:

(1′) There is a possible world in which James weds,

and

(2′) There is a possible world in which James never weds.

One could hardly defeat James's hopes for eventual matrimony by pointing out that, if (1′) *is true*, then surely (2′) is also true, and that these propositions jointly entail the impossible scenario expressed in (3′)! Possibility (logical or otherwise) is not in general closed under Agglomeration.[3]

Does this summary dismissal of the argument for (3) overlook any resource available to Robinson? The argument in question has this form:

There is a possible world in which A is F.
There is a possible world in which A is G.
Therefore, there is a possible world in which A is both F and G.

While this inference-form is generally invalid, perhaps there are specific conditions under which its conclusion does indeed follow from its premises. In fact, if either F or G (it needn't be both) is an *essential property* of A – one that A has in any possible world in which A exists – then the conclusion does appear to follow from the premises. (In the case of James, for example, what allowed him to escape the sorry fate laid out in (3′), despite the truth of (1′) and (2′), is that the property of getting married at some time or other, which he possesses in the world cited

in (1′), is presumably not a property which he has there essentially, and which would then follow him like a shadow into other worlds in which he exists.) This suggests a way that Robinson might be able to salvage his claim that The Scenario implies (3).

Suppose that A's being explanatorily dependent on K, and K on E, is an essential property of A.[4] This is not at all an outrageous supposition. One might appeal, for example, to the idea that the *causal origins* of a thing are essential to it. To ask how things might go for *this very thing* is to ask what might happen to something that came to be what it is in *this very way*. And clearly the causal/explanatory story told in (1) provides just this sort of information about A. But then any world in which E is explanatorily dependent on A is a world in which E is explanatorily dependent on an A that is explanatorily dependent on K and K on E. Since (2) affirms the possibility of such a world, (3) is true after all.

Unfortunately, this salvage operation is doomed to failure. The problem is that, once A is understood in the way required for the operation's success, (2) loses completely its former attractiveness. There is good reason to suppose that *an* event-token of the type 'God's advising Larry to marry Lucy' might contribute causally to Linda's falling in love with Lucas; but there is no good reason to suppose that *this* token, with its actual causal/explanatory antecedents (which include God's simple foreknowledge that Linda will fall in love with Lucas), might contribute causally to Linda's falling in love with Lucas.

My defence against Robinson's critique, then, is simply this. When his argument is read in such a way that both its premises are acceptable, the argument is invalid; and when it is read in such a way that the conclusion does arguably follow from its premises, there is no reason (at least none that I can see) to accept premise (2) – indeed, (MP) itself provides the best reason in the world to reject this premise.

Insofar as there remains anything intuitively unsatisfactory about this response, I suspect it may be the following. If A's dependence on K and E is part of A's very identity, then (given MP) A cannot make any causal or explanatory contribution to E. Suppose that's right. But it's also a bit puzzling. As noted earlier, A has the means (it's the type of event that could contribute to E) and it has the opportunity (E falls in A's light-cone). What cosmic policeman is going to step forward to ensure that A leaves E alone and that MP isn't violated? Since this worry is reminiscent of what many find troubling about time-travel stories, where the time traveller's options when visiting the past seem limited by future events which are presupposed by the time traveller's journey into the past, let's conclude with a brief consideration of this parallel problem.

What are we to say when Tim visits the past and tries to kill Grandfather – or, for a 'loopy' version of the grandfather paradox paralleling The Scenario, when Tim's journey into the past brings him face to face with Jim, the man who will later invent the time machine, and Tim has a chance to tell him how to do it?

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Of course Tim will fail to pass on the information, or Jim will fail to retain it.[5] But *could* Tim's knowledge inform Jim's invention? That's a difficult question; but *no matter how* one answers it, there is no call for concluding that Tim's presence in the past either implies or insinuates the possibility of an individious loop. If we hold that it is *not* possible for Tim-the-time-traveller's knowledge of time machines to inform their invention by Jim, we are clearly saying nothing that conflicts with the impossibility of causal loops (indeed, we're affirming their impossibility); and if we hold that it *is* possible for Tim's knowledge to influence Jim's invention, we must be thinking (if we accept the impossibility of causal loops) that Tim's knowledge, were this possibility realized, would not have been based on the future, and again we say nothing that implies or insinuates acceptance of invidious causal loops.

In an article to which both Robinson and I refer, David Lewis argues that 'Tim doesn't but can', and 'Tim doesn't and can't' may both be true, since 'can' in this context is equivocal:

> Tim's killing Grandfather that day in 1921 is compossible with a fairly rich set of facts: the facts about his rifle, his skill and training, the unobstructed line of fire, the locked door and the absence of any chaperone to defend the past, and so on. Indeed it is compossible with all the facts of the sorts we would ordinarily count as relevant in saying what someone can do. It is compossible with all the facts corresponding to those we deem relevant in Tom's case [a non-time-traveller who is also gunning for Grandfather]. Relative to these facts, Tim can kill Grandfather. But his killing Grandfather is not compossible with another, more inclusive set of facts. There is the simple fact that Grandfather was not killed. Also there are various other facts about Grandfather's doings after 1921 and their effects: Grandfather begat Father in 1922 and Father begat Tim in 1949. Relative to these facts, Tim cannot kill Grandfather. He can and he can't, but under different delineations of the relevant facts. You can reasonably choose the narrower delineation, and say that he can; or the wider delineation, and say that he can't. But choose. What you mustn't do is waver, say in the same breath that he both can and can't, and then claim that this contradiction proves that time travel is impossible.[6]

It seems to me that the same thing should be said on behalf of The Scenario. Robinson tries to pin me down on whether the foreknown event E and its role in God's deliberations are accidentally necessary at T_2, when God advises Larry in light of His knowledge of that event, but The Scenario avoids conflict with MP either way. If E and its explanatory role with respect to A *are* accidentally necessary once God does A, then it is *not* (then) possible for A to help bring about E, and nothing in The Scenario commits me to saying otherwise. And if E and its explanatory role with respect to A are *not* accidentally necessary when God does A, then it may (still) *be* possible for A to help bring about E, since it is (still) possible that A not be explained by E – in which case, once again, there is nothing to suggest that The Scenario countenances the possibility of the sort of loop proscribed by MP. I incline, as it happens, toward the first of these answers, which treats A's causal/explanatory antecedents as accidentally necessary at T_2; but I'm

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under no obligation to defend it here, since neither answer puts The Scenario in conflict with MP.[7]

Of course, The Scenario will fail to salvage the providential utility of simple foreknowledge if the latter is impossible and therefore unavailable to God in the first place. I did not take up *this* possibility question, which seems to me to be a very difficult one. The Scenario was addressed only to philosophers and theologians who argue that simple foreknowledge should be rejected *because it is providentially useless*. The Scenario shows such arguments to be mistaken, at least insofar as they rely on MP.

Notes

1. David P. Hunt 'Divine providence and simple foreknowledge', *Faith and Philosophy*, **10** (1993), 394–414.
2. I attack the Doxastic Problem in a number of places, in addition to the article cited in n. 1. These include 'Omniprescient agency', *Religious Studies*, **28** (1992), 351–369; 'Prescience and providence: a reply to my critics', *Faith and Philosophy*, **10** (1993), 430–440; 'Dispositional omniscience', *Philosophical Studies*, **80** (1995), 243–278; 'The compatibility of omniscience and intentional action: a reply to Tomis Kapitan', *Religious Studies*, **32** (1996), 49–60; and 'Two problems with knowing the future', *American Philosophical Quarterly*, **34** (1997), 273–285, repr. in L. Nathan Oaklander (ed.) *The Importance of Time*, Philosophical Studies Series, v. 87 (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2001), 207–223.
3. Agglomeration is a rule of inference of the form, $@p, @q \therefore @(p \,\&\, q)$, where '@' is a modal operator. Agglomeration is presumptively valid when @ is a necessity-operator, though Michael Slote has identified cases of 'selective' necessity in which validity apparently fails; *idem* 'Selective necessity and the free will problem', *Journal of Philosophy*, **79** (1982), 5–24. Agglomeration is presumptively *in*valid when @ is a possibility-operator, as it is in the above argument.
4. The other candidate for an essential property validating the argument's conclusion – A's being an explanatory antecedent of E – is unavailable. Making this an essential property of A would simply beg the question against The Scenario, which is predicated on the possibility that A is *not* an explanatory antecedent of E.
5. This assumes, of course, that causal/explanatory loops are impossible. As I mention in 'Divine providence and simple foreknowledge', and Robinson reiterates in his article, David Lewis challenges their impossibility in 'The paradoxes of time travel', *American Philosophical Quarterly*, **13** (1976), 145–152. A number of science fiction stories are also premised on their possibility. These include Robert Heinlein's 'All you zombies', in which a single individual, employing time travel and sex-change operations, generates the entire population of Earth; and Stanislaw Lem's 'Project Genesis', in which a team of scientists accelerates a particle back to the origin of the universe so that the 'Big Bang' rests on a stable foundation rather than a quantum fluctuation.
6. Lewis 'The paradoxes of time travel', 150–151.
7. Brian Leftow has suggested to me (in correspondence) that God could simply intervene to disrupt any causal/explanatory flow from A to E. Here God Himself, in effect, plays the role of the 'cosmic policeman' referred to earlier. I have not availed myself of this suggestion only because I thought it important to argue that Robinson has given us no grounds to believe that The Scenario encourages metaphysical lawbreaking in the first place. If it should turn out that I am being unduly optimistic on this score, I am happy to bring in a divine policeman to ensure that MP not be violated.