Omniprescient Agency

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OMNIPRESCIENT AGENCY

The principle that

(P_1) One cannot deliberate over what one already (prior to deliberating) knows is going to happen,

when suitably qualified, has seemed to many philosophers to be about as secure a truth as one is likely to find in this life.[1] Fortunately, (P_1) poses little restriction on human deliberation, since the conditions which would trigger its prohibition seldom arise for us: our knowledge of the future is intermittent at best, and those things of which we do have advance knowledge (e.g. that the sun will rise tomorrow) are not the sorts of things over which we would deliberate in any case. But matters appear to stand otherwise with an all-knowing agent such as God is traditionally conceived to be; for what an omniprescient deity 'already knows is going to happen' is *everything* that is going to happen; and if He cannot deliberate over such things, there is nothing over which He can deliberate.[2]

Is this anything for the traditional theist to worry about? Perhaps not. If (P_1) is unproblematic for human agents on the grounds that we don't foreknow the sorts of things over which we deliberate, perhaps it is equally unproblematic for the Divine Agent on the grounds that He doesn't deliberate over the things He foreknows. Descartes had no compunction in denying deliberation to an agent who 'always recognised clearly what was true and good',[3] and this position has found more recent advocates as well.[4] But the theist is not yet off the hook if the same problem arises for less dispensable divine attributes as well. In itself, the ability to bypass deliberation means only that the agent's decisions are not preceded by a

[1] Among these qualifications would be the requirement that the knowledge is still possessed at the time of deliberation, and that it is possessed at that time in a fully conscious form. Philosophers who have endorsed this principle, with or without qualifications, include Stuart Hampshire and H. L. A. Hart, 'Decision, Intention and Certainty', *Mind*, LXVII (Jan. 1958), 1–12; Carl Ginet, 'Can the Will be Caused?', *Philosophical Review*, LXXI (Jan. 1962), 49–55; Richard Taylor, 'Deliberation and Foreknowledge', *American Philosophical Quarterly*, I (Jan. 1964), 73–80; Arnold S. Kaufman, 'Practical Decisions', *Mind*, LXXV (Jan. 1966), 25–44; Alvin I. Goldman, *A Theory of Human Action* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), p. 194; Robert G. Burton, 'Choice', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, XLII (June 1982), 581–6; and Tomis Kapitan, 'Deliberation and the Presumption of Open Alternatives', *Philosophical Quarterly*, XXXVI (April 1986), 230–51.

[2] The application of (P_1) to divine deliberation has been made by Taylor, *op. cit.*; Richard R. La Croix, 'Omniprescience and Divine Determinism', *Religious Studies*, XII (Sept. 1976), 365–81; and Tomis Kapitan, 'Can God Make Up His Mind?', *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, XV (1984), 37–47.

[3] *Meditations* IV.

[4] E.g. Philip Quinn, 'Divine Foreknowledge and Divine Freedom', *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, IX (1978), 219–40, and Bruce R. Reichenbach, 'Omniscience and Deliberation', *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, XVI (1984), 225–36.

deliberative process; it does not mean that the agent is exempt from *making* decisions. It appears, then, that the theist must still worry about

(P_2) One cannot make a decision with respect to what one already (prior to deciding) knows is going to happen.

And an even starker formulation might aim its prohibition directly at the action itself, apart from its cognitive or motivational antecedents, i.e.,

(P_3) One cannot intentionally do or refrain from doing what one already (prior to intending) knows is going to happen.

If *this* principle is acceptable, then what is at stake is divine agency itself, something which (perhaps unlike deliberation) is not easily discarded for the sake of divine foreknowledge.

(P_1), then, is not the only principle that challenges the concept of omniscient agency. But are these other principles true? This question has received far less attention in the literature than the corresponding question concerning (P_1). In making my own contribution to this less charted region of the larger territory, I will be focusing on (P_3) rather than (P_2).[5] Not only is (P_3) more likely than (P_2) to raise issues distinct from those already canvassed in discussions of (P_1), but it addresses the problem of divine agency at its most fundamental level. Intending, as Hector-Neri Castaneda has noted, is 'the central practitional state',[6] making (P_3) the decisive principle which determines whether a theist committed to divine omniscience must abandon divine agency altogether. A successful defence of (P_2) will hardly settle this issue if the theist can always switch to a concept of divine agency that does not involve decision-making; but if (P_3) is true, the theist has nowhere left to go.

Let me begin by laying out the argument against omniscient agency suggested by (P_3). In doing so, I will pay close attention to a recent critique of divine agency by Tomis Kapitan.[7] This critique – the first (to my knowledge) to implement a (P_3)-type strategy – will be useful as a touchstone for my own discussion of this strategy. While the argument that follows is not identical to Kapitan's, I believe that it captures the heart of his case against omniscient agency, and it is intended to be fully consonant with the various things that he says in his paper.

(1) There is nothing of which God is ignorant. (Divine Omniscience)

(2) God is an agent – that is, there is a Z such that Z is an exercise of agency on the part of God. (Divine Agency)

(3) Z is an exercise of agency on the part of X only if there is an action A and times t and t′ ($t \leqslant t'$) such that X acquires at t an intention to A at t′. (Analysis of Agency)

[5] I have addressed (P_1) in my 'Divine Providence and Simple Foreknowledge', *Faith and Philosophy* (forthcoming).

[6] Hector-Neri Castaneda, *Thinking and Doing*, Philosophical Studies Series in Philosophy, vol. 7 (Dordrecht, Netherlands: D. Reidel, 1975), p. 275.

[7] Tomis Kapitan, 'Agency and Omniscience', *Religious Studies*, XXVII (March 1991), 105–20.

(4) X acquires at t an intention to A at t′ only if X's A-ing at t′ is an open alternative for X at t. (Presumption of Openness)

(5) X's A-ing at t′ is an open alternative for X at t only if X is ignorant at t whether or not he will A at t′. (Presumption of Ignorance)

(6) Therefore there is something of which God is ignorant.

(7) But (1) and (6) are contradictory.

(8) Therefore at least one of the premises (1)–(5) must be rejected.

Premises (1) and (2) of this argument are positions to which the traditional theist is committed, while (3)–(5) are presuppositions of intentional agency which correspond to theses presented and defended by Kapitan in the course of his paper.[8] An explicit derivation of (6) from (2)–(5) might go like this:

(5.1) X's A-ing at t′ is an open alternative for X at t only if there is something of which X is ignorant. (5, Existential Generalization)

(5.2) Z is an exercise of agency on the part of X only if there is something of which X is ignorant. (3, 4, 5, 5.1, Hypothetical Syllogism)

(5.3) E is an exercise of agency on the part of God. (2, Existential Instantiation)

(5.4) E is an exercise of agency on the part of God only if there is something of which God is ignorant. (5.2, Universal Instantiation)

(6) then follows from (5.3) and (5.4) by Modus Ponens.

Since the argument is clearly valid, the only question is what response should be made to its concluding line. The critic, of course, is counting on the support to be marshalled on behalf of the non-theological premises (3)–(5) proving so unassailable that the theist will be forced to admit that it is one of the theological premises (1)–(2) that must be withdrawn. But I deny that the theist is faced with any such dilemma; for while there may be interpretations of the argument's key terms under which *some* of its non-theological premises are true, there is no (univocal) interpretation under which they are *all* true. In particular, I deny both (i) that agency (in any sense in which God is an agent) entails intention–acquisition, and (ii) that openness (in any sense in which openness is presupposed by intention–acquisition) entails ignorance. If I am right in either of these denials, the theist is under no obligation to abandon his commitment to omniscient agency on account of (P_3).

[8] The exact nature of this correspondence will be brought out in discussions of each premise later in the paper. While my version of the argument compresses certain stages of Kapitan's version, all but one of the premises of my version is entailed by premises of his version. The exception is premise (5). What is actually entailed by Kapitan's version (specifically, premises (5) and (8) on pages 113 and 115 of 'Agency and Omniscience') is (5′) X's A-ing at t′ is an open alternative for X at t only if X is ignorant at t whether or not he will intend to A at t′. But this difference is not materially significant, since neither (5) nor (5′) is more or less plausible than the other, and (6) follows equally from either one.

DOES AGENCY PRESUPPOSE INTENTION–ACQUISITION?

Let us look first at premise (3). There are really a couple of significant claims being made here, as is evident when this premise is derived from more fundamental principles of agency in the following way:[9]

(2.1) Z is an exercise of agency on the part of X only if Z is a case of (or is exercised through) intentional action.

(2.2) Z is a case of (or is exercised through) intentional action only if the causal antecedents of Z include a case of X's intending (something).

(2.3) The causal antecedents of Z include a case of X's intending (something) only if X intends (something).

(2.4) X intends (something) only if there is an action A and times t and t′ ($t \leqslant t'$) such that X acquires at t an intention to A at t′.

(3) Therefore Z is an exercise of agency on the part of X only if there is an action A and times t and t′ ($t \leqslant t'$) such that X acquires at t an intention to A at t′. (2.1–2.4, Hypothetical Syllogism)

Of these auxiliary premises, (2.3) is a trivial instance of Existential Generalization while (2.2) is an analytic nicety that is not crucial to the argument.[10] The substantive premises are (2.1), which identifies agency with intentional action, and (2.4), which makes acquisition at a time essential to intention.

I have just a few comments to make about (2.1) before turning to (2.4). The function of this auxiliary premise in the argument is to distinguish actions from mere events, and this function is certainly a legitimate one. But there is no consensus in action theory that this is the right way to make the distinction, nor that (2.1) is even true.[11] So this is one point at which a defender of omniscient agency might launch a counterattack. I will leave the development of this response to others, however, for the following reasons: (i) I think that (2.1) is probably true; (ii) even if it admits of exceptions when applied to human agency, it might still be true for divine agency; and (iii) it is hard to gauge the significance of (2.1) until we learn from subsequent steps in the argument exactly what is packed into the notion of 'intention'. I suggest, then, that we regard this premise as innocent and focus our attention on (2.4).

Since Kapitan accepts (2.4) and makes it a crucial part of his argument, we should take a serious look at the reasons he adduces on its behalf. These turn out to be remarkably simple. His first move is to identify a larger class of *propensities*, of which intendings are a subclass. Some propensities, then, are intentional, while others are not; these latter are characterized variously

[9] Kapitan's brief discussion of the nature of intentional agency on pp. 107–8 of 'Agency and Omniscience' suggests that he would endorse the argument that follows.

[10] Unless the reference to causal antecedents in (2.2) is taken to rule out atemporal intendings. But it is best to save this question for (2.4), where times are first introduced explicitly.

[11] For an entire book devoted to the case against (2.1), see Myles Brand, *Intending and Acting* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1984).

as 'instinctual', 'necessary', 'innate', 'inherent', and the like. Now there must be some differentia which distinguishes the intentional species of propensity from the non-intentional (to say that this is simply their difference with respect to being intended is not helpful). Kapitan is quite clear what this differentia is: 'intendings are... distinguished by the fact that one must come to intend at some point in time',[12] whereas one can just *have* a (mere) propensity. *Having been acquired*, then, is an essential attribute of intentional propensities not shared by non-intentional propensities. And how does this particular attribute get assigned the all-important role of differentia? Simply by default, it would appear; for 'without having *acquired* an intending attitude', Kapitan writes, 'there is no distinguishing intentional states from innate propensities and no demarcating intentional from non-intentional activity'.[13]

This is the entirety of what Kapitan has to say on behalf of (2.4).[14] It is far from sufficient, however. What's more, the premise it is designed to support is almost certainly false, and the argument it offers on behalf of that premise only trivializes the larger issue. I will take the last of these points first.

We have seen that Kapitan's defence of (2.4) involves both of the following claims:

(C_1) Acquisition at a time is *essential* to intendings.

(C_2) Acquisition at a time is the *only* difference between intentional and non-intentional propensities.

Since these claims bear on our understanding of a key term in the argument against omniscient agency, they must be consistent with the purpose of that argument, which is to show foreknowledge incompatible with some feature of divine agency to which the believer is deeply committed. Kapitan makes the case at the very beginning of his paper that intentionality is such a feature, noting that 'believers typically find assurance in the conception of a divine being's will, and cherish confidence in its capacity to implement its intentions and plans'.[15] Of course, the argument Kapitan goes on to formulate has no tendency at all to show that an omniscient being cannot have and implement mere propensities. So the theological relevance of that argument turns on whether there is anything about full-fledged intentions in virtue of which only they can provide the assurance and confidence the believer craves. But this is extremely doubtful, given Kapitan's support for (C_2). What is it about the difference between *acquired* and *unacquired* propensities that should galvanize the believer? If this is what the distinction comes down to, its theological triviality is assured.

[12] 'Agency and Omniscience', p. 107.

[13] *Ibid.* p. 108.

[14] Kapitan does note on p. 108, with respect to the all-intentions-are-acquired thesis, that 'one might ask whether there are other grounds in its favour'. But the discussion which follows this remark never gets around to saying what these other grounds might be.

[15] *Ibid.* p. 105.

Recall that the strategic value of (P_3) is supposed to lie in its capacity to shut off all escape routes for the theist who, having been forced by (P_1) and (P_2) to retreat from deliberative to decisional to intentional agency, is now faced with the prospect of surrendering divine agency altogether. This strategic advantage is lost as soon as (C_2) enters the picture; for in rendering the difference between intentional and nonintentional propensities theologically trivial, (C_2) opens up yet another position – call it 'simple agency' – to which the theist can withdraw. To the objection that there *is* no further position which allows for divine agency, we know how the theist will reply: 'What is important to me about divine agency is the assurance and confidence I derive from it. Naturally, I always assumed that God's providential activity is grounded in divine intentions of some sort; what I didn't realize is that propensities are just as good as intentions, except that they are unacquired. Now that I have been enlightened on this point, I find that I am no less assured and confident attributing divine providence to God's propensities than I am attributing it to God's intentions; indeed, I am more assured, since my new confidence in *simple* agency cannot be shaken by (P_3)-type doubts regarding *intentional* agency.'

This declaration by the believer leaves the critic with just two options. (i) If the theist can come up with a further position on divine agency, the critic might always hope to come up with a further principle to defeat it. This hope is likely to be dashed, however. An obvious defeater of omniscient simple agency, and the apparent next step in the progression from (P_1)–(P_3), is

(P_4) One cannot do or refrain from doing what one already (prior to doing) knows is going to happen.

But this principle is simply false; nor is it easy to think of an alternative to (P_4) that would confute the theist's most recent position (and also be true). (ii) A better course for the critic is to prevent intentional agency from becoming theologically trivial in the first place. That means dropping (C_2) – an apparently costless move, since (C_1) is all that the argument requires. Unfortunately, Kapitan is not in a position to do this. (C_2) provides powerful support for (C_1); without (C_2), (C_1) is much more dubious. Indeed, once other differences between intentional and non-intentional propensities have been admitted, one will come to expect some argument for continuing to regard acquisition as an essential difference at all. Kapitan has saved himself the trouble of providing such an argument by relying on (C_2); without (C_2), there is nothing to take its place.

Of course, the important question is not whether Kapitan has succeeded in demonstrating (C_1), but whether (C_1) is in fact demonstrable (or even plausible). This is doubtful, however. The presumption against (C_1) can be brought out by noting that the dominant account of intentions in the literature is the 'belief–desire' account, according to which an agent's intentions are to be cashed out in terms of particular congeries of beliefs and

desires.[16] But acquisition at a time does not appear to be an essential feature of beliefs or desires in general; nor is there any apparent reason to regard it as an essential feature of the particular congeries of beliefs and desires which (on the belief–desire account) constitute intentions. Moreover, it is hard to think of any other (plausible) account of intentions under which their acquisition is mandatory.

Consider a case of intentional action drawn from the human sphere – e.g. my grabbing an umbrella from the umbrella stand as I go out of the door. In explaining what makes this action intentional (rather than instinctual, etc.), we would presumably refer to items like the following: (*a*) the belief that it is raining; (*b*) the desire not to get wet; (*c*) acquaintance with the proper use of umbrellas; (*d*) the immediate goal of buying my wife a gift; (*e*) the more remote goal of ensuring domestic tranquillity; (*f*) a plan co-ordinating these goals with others (e.g. how to let her know that my mother is coming for Christmas); (*g*) the rejection of alternative means (ordering a gift by mail, waiting for the rain to stop); (*h*) the assessment of competing values (buying her a necklace *v.* making a charitable contribution in her name); and so on. It is a vexed question in action theory how best to generalize from such items in providing necessary and sufficient conditions for intentional action. But there is no doubt that in this case at least the intentional character of my action is essentially connected to its dependence on (*a*)–(*h*). Nor would there be any doubt in a case of non-intentional behaviour – e.g. I take the umbrella as the result of posthypnotic suggestion, or Pavlovian conditioning, or sheer accident (the crook of the umbrella gets caught in my pocket as I pass the umbrella rack on my way out of the door) – that the non-intentional character of my behaviour in *this* case is essentially connected to its *lack* of dependence on such items as (*a*)–(*h*). Acquisition at a time is not even a candidate for such a role: it is not a sufficient condition for intentionhood, since non-intentional propensities may also be acquired (as in the hypnotism and conditioning cases); nor are there any grounds for supposing it to be a necessary condition. Even if every intention possessed by human agents is in fact acquired at some time or another, no reason has been given for regarding this as anything more than a contingent feature of human intentionality which is not automatically extendable to non-human agents.

Let me pursue this last point with special reference to the case of non-human agency that most concerns us, namely, that of God. In doing so, I will borrow liberally from a recent essay by William Alston.[17] Alston admits that an omniscient deity 'cannot go through any genuine process of deliberation as to what to do at *t*, or any process of genuine *formation* of an

[16] Among those who have espoused some version of the belief–desire account are Robert Audi, Monroe Beardsley, Hector-Neri Castaneda, Donald Davidson, Alvin Goldman, and Wilfrid Sellars.

[17] William P. Alston, 'Divine and Human Action', in Thomas V. Morris, ed., *Divine and Human Action* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), pp. 257–80.

intention to do something at t, since at every previous moment He will already know what He will do at t'.[18] But this does not entail the collapse of divine intentionality, since there is nothing incoherent in the concept of an unacquired intention. Alston defends its coherence *via* a functionalist account of the Divine Mind. According to functionalism, a particular psychological state – a belief, attitude, or intention – is simply 'what performs a particular *function* in the psychological economy, a particular "job" done by the psyche, just as the concept of a loudspeaker is the concept of what performs a certain function, viz., converting electronic signals to sound'.[19] While the thing embodying a function may 'take time' to perform its task, this is not an essential feature of functions *per se*. Thus a psychological function can even be 'embodied' in something that stands outside of time altogether. I take the liberty of quoting Alston at length:

> We can assure ourselves of the intelligibility of this conception by taking as our model a physical system – mechanical, electromagnetic, or thermal – in which the values of some variables at a given time are a determinate function of the values of other variables at that same time. This gives us the idea of *simultaneous* 'subjunctive' or 'counterfactual' dependence, in contrast to the dependence of states on those that precede them in time.... Hence we are able to form the conception of a being (a 'system') in which some factors depend on their relations to others for being what they are, even though there are no temporally successive processes of formation, nor any subjection to laws. More specifically, we are to think of God as realising a complex structure of attitudes, knowledge, tendencies, executive intentions, and volitions in the 'eternal now,' a structure that involves the kinds of dependence we have been talking about.[20]

Alston thus concurs with my claim that what makes a propensity intentional is not its relation to time, but its dependence on a complex of cognitive and conative factors of the sort exemplified by (a)–(h). It is this that accounts for the essential character of intentions, both in the human case (where they are acquired) and in the divine case (where they are not).

I conclude that there is no good reason to believe that intentions must be acquired, and every reason to think otherwise. Premise (3) is therefore unwarranted, and the argument fails. Given this failure, how ought one to assess the threat to classical theism posed by (P_3)? I have focused on Kapitan's argument because it is the only full-fledged implementation of the (P_3)-strategy in the literature; but it is not the only one possible, and the critic might wonder whether (P_3) could be implemented in ways that do not require premise (3). I do not see that this is possible, however, since any variant on (1)–(8) would have to contain some premise(s) to play the role of (3), triggering the same objections we have just reviewed. The reason is that (P_3) is a prohibition on knowing prior to intending. If God is to run

[18] *Ibid.* p. 278. [19] *Ibid.* p. 265. [20] *Ibid.* p. 275.

afoul of this prohibition, it must be shown that He cannot avoid knowing prior to intending. But He *can* avoid this situation if there *is* no prior-to-intending for God – that is, if all His intentions are possessed from eternity. Thus it is absolutely essential to rule out unacquired intendings if (P_3) is to be used against omniscient agency. If, as I have argued, this cannot be done, then no (P_3)-type argument can succeed.

This is enough to satisfy the traditional believer's stake in the matter. But the argument raises sufficiently interesting issues concerning divine agency that it is worth pursuing through its remaining premises.

DOES INTENTION–ACQUISITION PRESUPPOSE OPENNESS?

If an intention is essentially what performs a certain function within an agent's 'psychological economy', the acquisition (and continued possession) of an intention will depend on what is happening elsewhere in the system. Some psychological contexts are congenial to such acquisitions, while others are not. For example, acquiring the intention to take an umbrella is appropriate in the context of (*a*)–(*h*), but inappropriate in the context of (*a'*) the belief that there is not a cloud in the sky; (*b'*) the desire to get soaking wet (I am auditioning for the Gene Kelly role in a remake of *Singin' in the Rain*); (*c'*) ignorance of the proper use of umbrellas; and so forth. To these factors influencing the agent's receptivity to intention–acquisition must be added the extent to which the contemplated action is judged to be an *open alternative*. If I somehow come to believe that taking the umbrella is not an available option, this will stultify the intention to take it just as surely as (*a'*), (*b'*) or (*c'*). Thus our intender seems committed to premise (4), the Presumption of Openness. But 'openness' is vague. We must see whether this concept can be unpacked in such a way that the two premises in which it figures come out true.

There may be more than one way to do this. To ensure that the concept of openness with which we are working is one that is friendly to the argument, I suggest that we once again follow Kapitan. He formulates in his paper a number of restrictions on intention–acquisition which, in combination with a definition of openness, can be used to defend (4) in the following way:

(3.1) X acquires at t an intention to A at t′ only if X presumes that there is a chance that he would A (would refrain from A-ing) at t′ were he to intend to A (to refrain from A-ing) at t′. (Presumption of Efficacy[21]

(3.2) X acquires at t an intention to A at t′ only if X presumes that he would not A at t′ unless he intended to A at t′. (Presumption of Need)[22]

[21] This is proposition (1) on p. 110 of 'Agency and Omniscience'.
[22] *Ibid.* proposition (3).

(3.3) X acquires at t an intention to A at t′ only if X presumes that his intending to A at t′ is as yet contingent. (Presumption of Contingency)[23]

(3.4) Therefore X acquires at t an intention to A at t′ only if X presumes that: (i) there is a chance that he would A (would refrain from A-ing) at t′ were he to intend to A (to refrain from A-ing) at t′; (ii) he would not A at t′ unless he intended to A at t′; and (iii) his intending to A at t′ is as yet contingent. (3.1, 3.2, 3.3, Conjunction)

(3.5) X's A-ing at t′ is an open alternative for X at t *iff* X presumes each of clauses (i), (ii), and (iii) from (3.4). (Definition of Openness)[24]

(4) Therefore X acquires at t an intention to A at t′ only if X's A-ing at t′ is an open alternative for X at t. (3.4, 3.5, Replacement)[25]

In effect, this makes (4), the Presumption of Openness, analysable into three sub-presumptions. Since the concept of openness defined in (3.5) depends only on what the agent presumes or *believes*, not on whether the belief is true, I shall call this 'doxastic openness,' to distinguish it from alternative conceptions. Let us look briefly at the reasonableness of the three sub-presumptions which enter into doxastic openness.

Premises (3.1) and (3.2) can be considered together, since their contribution to the Presumption of Openness consists of their jointly expressing what Kapitan calls a 'principle of least effort'.[26] Acquiring an intention is the first step in a (possibly arduous) expenditure of effort directed towards some goal. The idea is that X would not acquire at t an intention to A at t′ if his assessment of the situation at t were such that an intention to A at t′ would not make any difference to the outcome – that is, if the intention would be either inefficacious (because A would not obtain at t′ even if X intended to A) or unneeded (because A would obtain at t′ even if X did not intend to A). For example, the intention to take the umbrella would be stultified if (*a*)–(*h*) were joined by either (*i*) the belief that the umbrella is securely welded to the umbrella-rack, or (*j*) the belief that a servant has been hired whose sole and unwavering duty is to accompany me with that umbrella whenever it is raining. The former illustrates a violation of the Presumption of Efficacy, the latter a violation of the Presumption of Need.

While the point of these two presumptions is tolerably clear, a number of questions still remain. For instance, what kind of principle *is* the principle of least effort? Kapitan introduces the principle with the proviso, 'if nature does nothing in vain'[27] – presumably a reference to natural selection and the maladaptive effects of an inherited tendency to acquire and act on intentions that are believed to be inefficacious or unneeded. But construing the principle

[23] *Ibid.* p. 112, proposition (4). I have omitted the final clause in Kapitan's formulation, 'relative to what he himself then believes (knows)', since I do not address this aspect of the contingency in question until the next section of this paper. [24] *Ibid.* p. 113, proposition (5).

[25] This statement of the Presumption of Openness is very close to Kapitan's proposition (7) on p. 114 of 'Agency and Omniscience'. [26] *Ibid.* p. 107. [27] *Ibid.*

as a contingent thesis about the workings of nature – which would hinder its application to the traditional (non-process) God – is clearly not what Kapitan has in mind; rather, the principle of least effort is supposed to serve as a *necessary* stricture on *rational* intention–acquisition. This is a stiff standard to meet, however. It assumes (i) that a rational agent would not do anything pointless, and (ii) that the only point of intending to A is to contribute toward the obtaining of A. But if we ensure the truth of (i) by adopting a broad view of what counts as the point of an activity, we make it less likely that (ii) will be true.[28] Nevertheless, I am not going to embark on the long detour into action theory that might be necessary in order to address these and other questions that would be raised concerning (3.1) and (3.2), since the success of the argument depends much more crucially on (3.3).[29] I propose, then, that we move on to the Presumption of Contingency.

It is a bit harder to grasp the idea behind (3.3), though it might be designed to address a perceived inadequacy in (3.1) and (3.2) which parallels an inadequacy that libertarians find in the classical compatibilists' 'conditional analysis' of the power to do otherwise. This analysis states that an agent has the power to do otherwise *iff* the situation in which he acts is such that, *had* he intended (willed, chosen) to act otherwise, he *would* have acted otherwise; but libertarians object to the analysis on the grounds that the (hypothetical) efficacy of an intention for an action does not bring the action within the ambit of an agent's power unless the intention is itself within the agent's power, and the analysis fails to require this. In similar fashion, (3.1) and (3.2) state the agent's presumption of his conditional power over A in the circumstances; what still needs expression is the agent's presumption of his power over *intending* to A in the circumstances. This is the presumption set forth in (3.3). All three sub-presumptions within the Presumption of Openness can then be understood as expressing strictures which filter out intentional actions that the agent does not believe to lie within his power in the circumstances as he understands them.

Divining the motive behind (3.3), however, is less important than understanding what it says (and whether what it says is true). In particular, what kind of case is the Presumption of Contingency supposed to rule out? The most obvious sort of case would seem to be one in which the agent believes that he has been hypnotized, conditioned, drugged, traumatized, or the like,

[28] For example, if I believe (i) that my intending to make a generous contribution to Amnesty International is sufficient for my making a generous contribution to Amnesty International, (ii) that Dr X's throwing a switch on a box through which he can control my brain is sufficient for my making a generous contribution to Amnesty International, and (iii) that Dr X is in fact going to throw that switch, I might nevertheless form the intention to make a generous contribution to Amnesty International just because I value my intentional participation in a worthy cause. Here the point of intention–acquisition is simply to possess the intention.

[29] Kapitan alludes to some of these issues himself on pp. 109–10 of 'Agency and Omniscience', though I think they require more discussion than he gives them if the principle of least effort is to have the secure status his argument requires.

in such a way that he is quite literally powerless to intend (refrain from intending) to A at t′. Suppose, for example, that I suffer from a crippling phobia with regard to umbrellas, whose roots lie in the disciplinary use to which those unassuming implements were put by sadistic step-parents during my childhood. This phobia might be so debilitating that my current 'psychological economy' encompasses (*k*) the belief that I cannot intentionally touch that umbrella. On this interpretation, the Presumption of Contingency appears to be an extension of the principle of least effort: there is no point in an agent undertaking to acquire an intention which he does not believe himself capable of acquiring.

Surprisingly, Kapitan does not discuss cases like this, which seem paradigms of presumed non-contingency. Rather, he illustrates the Presumption of Contingency with the example of Nathan, who

> might think he would drink whiskey were he to try, would not do so unless he intended, yet also believes that he will not so choose. He has ruled out drinking whiskey, perhaps for deep-seated moral reasons, and having done so, his mind is already settled and he no longer considers drinking whiskey an *open* alternative... Drinking whiskey is taken to be open only if he takes it for granted that he both can so intend and can avoid so intending, that is, only if he presumes that his decision about the matter, whatever it might be, is as yet *contingent*.[30]

Here it is an earlier *decision* or *commitment* by the agent which is said to conflict with a presumption of contingency. The justification for this claim must go something like this. Nathan's prior decision not to drink whiskey forms part of the background conditions which determine whether a prospective intention regarding whiskey-drinking is or is not contingent. Given that decision, Nathan cannot also intend *to* drink whiskey – at least if he is to satisfy the canons of minimal rationality, which require him to avoid inconsistent intendings; nor can he acquire the intention *not* to drink whiskey, since one cannot acquire what one already possesses (he can 'rehearse' his teetotaling intention, as Kapitan terms it, but he cannot now acquire it). So Nathan's prior (and continuing) commitment does appear in some sense to limit his intentional possibilities.

The sense in which it does this, however, is quite different from the sense in which a person who believes himself to be the victim of a deep-seated phobia might presume his intentional capacities to be delimited. A decision not to take the umbrella (because it doesn't belong to me, I don't like its style, I have too much to carry anyway, etc.) would result, not in (*k*) the belief that I *cannot* intentionally touch that umbrella, but rather in (*k**) the belief that I *won't* do so. Now it is true that the two cases – the phobia case and the decision case – are alike to this extent: certain conditions (the phobia, the decision) are inconsistent with my intending to take the umbrella. But they differ to this extent: I presume the phobia, but not the

[30] *Ibid.* p. 111.

decision, to lie outside my power. Because of this difference, only the phobia case supports (*k*). If I nevertheless regard umbrella-taking as a closed option in the decision case as well, it can only be for purposes of practical reasoning. Once I decide not to take the umbrella, a certain 'closure' has been achieved on the subject, in virtue of which I can rely on this decision in making further plans (what coat to wear, which errands to postpone until tomorrow, etc.). But such closure is merely provisional, since the issue can always be reopened (as I step out into the pouring rain, I reconsider my scruples against borrowing umbrellas without their owners' permission). I do not for a moment confuse the practical presumption of non-contingency that I make in the decision case with the sense of utter powerlessness that I experience in the phobia case.

I suggest, then, that the doxastic openness asserted in premise (4) encompasses two very different species of contingency: the one defined in terms of what lies within an agent's power, the other defined in terms of practical reasoning. Both species must be kept in mind as we move to the argument's final premise.

DOES OPENNESS PRESUPPOSE IGNORANCE?

We must now examine whether the concept of openness required by premise (4) has the implications asserted in premise (5). Based on the discussion in the preceding section, we can represent (5) by way of the following expanded formulation:

(5!) X's A-ing at t′ is a (doxastically) open alternative for X at t – i.e. X presumes at t that
- (i) there is a chance that he would A (would refrain from A-ing) at t′ were he to intend to A (to refrain from A-ing) at t′;
- (ii) he would not A at t′ unless he intended to A at t′; and
- (iii) his intending to A at t′ is as yet contingent, i.e.
  - (*a*) it is within his power at t to intend to A (to refrain from A-ing) at t′, and
  - (*b*) he does not possess at t a previously acquired intention to A (to refrain from A-ing) at t′ –

only if X is ignorant at t whether or not he will A at t′.

The truth-value of a conditional like (5!) turns on whether there is any valuation under which its antecedent is true while its consequent is false – that is, whether X's presumption at t that his intending to A at t′ is (i) efficacious for his A-ing at t′, (ii) needed for his A-ing at t′, and (iii) contingent in senses (*a*) and (*b*), is consistent with (iv) his believing (knowing) at t that he will A at t′. It seems to me that there is such a valuation, and that (5!) is therefore false – at the very least, I do not see how the defender of the argument can possibly show that there is *no* such valuation.

If we leave (iii*b*) out of account for the moment, the remaining claims from (i)–(iv) seem consistent enough. Suppose I have just decided to give a student a failing mark in a class, but have not yet implemented my decision. Then the following might (and almost certainly will) be true: (i′) I believe that *I will fail the student if I decide to do so*; (ii′) I believe that *I will fail the student only if I decide to do so*; (iii*a*′) I believe that *the decision whether to fail the student is within my power*;[31] and (iv′) I believe that *I will in fact fail the student*. In general, (iv) is a belief about what *will* (actually) happen, and there does not appear to be any inevitable conflict between such a belief and an agent's further beliefs about what *could* happen (as in (iii*a*)) or what *would* happen under certain conditions (as in (i) and (ii)).

Despite the considerations just set forth, Kapitan's paper contains the following argument for the incompatibility of foreknowledge with the presumptions of efficacy and need:

> What could motivate someone to undertake an action unless he or she sensed both a need for the required effort and a chance that it might succeed, and how could this happen *if* the agent already knew what is to take place? If it is going to occur, no need, and if slated not to occur, no chance.[32]

While Kapitan does not explicitly endorse the argument in this passage, it is significant that he never renounces it either. It is possible, then, that this is the sort of reasoning that lies behind his support for (5). If so, his acceptance of (5) rests on a simple modal fallacy, similar to the one exhibited in the following argument said to have been made during the 1940 bombing of London:

> Either you are going to be killed by a bomb or you are not going to be. If you are, then any precautions you take will be ineffective. If you are not, all precautions you take are superfluous. Therefore it is pointless to take precautions.[33]

And on similar grounds, one might claim, it is pointless to intend what (one believes) will happen or what (one believes) will not happen. But the fallacy here is obvious. The fact that X will A at t′ only means that X *will not* refrain from A-ing at t′; it does not mean that X *cannot* refrain from A-ing at t′. Thus it has no implications for the effectiveness of X's intentions with respect to A-ing at t′, and X (if rational) will not regard it as having such implications.

I conclude that, in the absence of (iii*b*) at least, there is no necessary inconsistency within the set (i)–(iv). Once (iii*b*) is added to the mix, however, a new concern arises which can be stated as follows. Any rational agent who (iv) believes that he will perform a certain action and (ii) presumes that he

[31] Of course, it is not within my power to have decided to fail the student, since the making of that decision now lies in the past; but it does remain within my power whether to maintain that decision or to revise it.

[32] 'Agency and Omniscience', p. 105.

[33] Quoted in Michael Dummett, 'Bringing about the Past', *Philosophical Review*, LXXIII (July 1964), pp. 338–59.

will perform that action only if he intends to perform it must also (v) believe that he intends to perform it. But if in addition he (iii*b*) presumes that he does not yet possess such an intention, he must (if rational) (vi) believe that he will acquire this intention sometime in the future. But it is impossible (the argument continues) to hold in advance a belief about what one will later decide to do. Since (vi) is necessarily false and is entailed by the conjunction of (i)–(iv), the latter is necessarily false. So if (i)–(iii) are true, (iv) must be false. And this is just what is claimed by (5!).

This argument, based on a rejection of (vi), constitutes the strongest (if not the only) case that the critic of omniscient agency can make on behalf of (5!). What (vi) presupposes and the critic denies is the claim that propositions (vi*a*) X believes that he *will* intend to A at t′ and (vi*b*) X believes that he *does not yet* intend to A at t′ are consistent. The critic's denial of this claim reflects his position that an agent cannot believe (that is, be *doxastically* committed to) the proposition that he will intend to perform a certain action unless he already intends (that is, has become *practically* committed) to perform that action. I can see only two grounds on which this position might be maintained.

One ground for denying the consistency of (vi*a*) and (vi*b*) is the assumption that X's having already acquired, and believing that he has already acquired, the intention to A at t′ is a (necessary) condition for X's believing that he will intend to A at t′. So if (vi*b*) is true, (vi*a*) must be false. This assumption, however, places divine foreknowledge under extraordinary restrictions; in particular, it restricts God's foreknowledge to extrapolations from present knowledge, thereby excluding alternative sources of divine prescience like simple foreknowledge and middle knowledge. But there is no reason to expect the traditional theist to accept such a restriction. Basing the argument on this assumption only reduces it to circularity.

The other ground for denying the consistency of (vi*a*) and (vi*b*) is the assumption that X's believing that he will intend to A at t′ is a (sufficient) condition for X's having already acquired, and believing that he has already acquired, the intention to A at t′. So if (vi*a*) is true, (vi*b*) must be false. But this assumption is no more acceptable than the first one. Alvin Goldman tells a story in which he discovers a book of predictions, gains complete confidence in its accuracy (since the predictions always come true), and then finds to his sorrow that the book ends with the prediction that he will commit suicide in five years' time.[34] Having already assented to the book's veracity, he manfully accepts the prediction. But only his beliefs have been engaged; his will has not yet been engaged (since life is treating him well at the moment), and it is only as his circumstances undergo a dramatic change for the worse over the next five years that he will come to intend (and not merely believe) his suicide. This is surely how a (rational) agent would respond in the situation;

[34] *Op. cit.* p. 192.

and since the assumption under review denies the independence of belief from intention illustrated by the story, it must (like the first assumption) be rejected.

Interestingly, while Kapitan accepts the second of these assumptions (and possibly the first as well), his own defence of premise (5) takes a somewhat different direction. He begins with the fact that the contingency which enters into doxastic openness involves a relativized modality – that is, the agent understands certain background conditions to obtain, and then presumes that, relative to those conditions, it remains open whether A will be intended at t or done at t′. Openness, then, is a species of

Relative Contingency: P is contingent relative to a set of conditions S just in case neither P nor not-P is a consequence of S.[35]

This makes the Presumption of Openness a presumption of contingency relative to some set of conditions S. But how is S to be identified? Kapitan lists three candidates for the set of conditions relevant to acquiring an intention at t:

(A) all propositions true at t (including those with reference to the past and future);

(B) all states of affairs (facts, conditions) obtaining prior to and including t; or,

(C) all that he or she (the agent) then (at t) believes (or knows).[36]

Since the set we are looking for must yield a doxastic sense of openness, (A) and (B) are non-starters; we are thus 'forced' by the alternatives offered us to choose (C). Once granted, (C) allows the critic to wrap up the argument in short order. Set (C) for an omniscient agent will include knowledge of everything that the agent will ever do. Thus none of this agent's actions will be contingent relative to (C); nor will any of them be doxastically open, if the latter is simply contingency relative to (C). But if none is doxastically open, then it follows from premises (3) and (4) that none is a case of agency. So an omniscient being cannot be an agent after all.

So much for the consequences of accepting (C). But we should not let ourselves be pressured into going along with this forced choice. While an important stricture on the set we are seeking is that it define a doxastic sense of openness, (C) is not the only set that does this. It is true that most of (C)'s doxastic competitors – e.g. the set of all propositions about the Gunpowder Plot that the agent believes at t – are themselves non-starters. But not all of (C)'s competitors are so clearly inappropriate; in particular, consider

(D) all *propositions about times earlier than t* that he or she (the agent) then (at t) believes (or knows).

Significantly, if doxastic openness were defined in terms of (D) rather than (C), premise (5) would not go through; for then the agent's foreknowledge at t that he will A at t′, since it does not belong to (D), would not count

[35] 'Agency and Omniscience', p. 111. [36] *Ibid.*

against the relative contingency of his A-ing at t′. So we can put the crucial question as follows: Why define doxastic openness in terms of (C) rather than (D)? Since Kapitan does mention a number of reasons for preferring (C), we should consider each of these in turn.

(i) His first point in support of (C) is that it 'has the advantage of not rendering a decision-making determinist inconsistent'.[37] This is because an agent can subscribe to the general thesis of determinism without holding any beliefs about the specific events and laws by which his future behaviour is determined; but without the latter, no specification of the agent's future behaviour follows from his beliefs, and consequently there is no doxastic interference with his acquiring the intention to act in a certain way. The theist, however, will be unimpressed by this brief on behalf of (C). In the first place, the theist has no obligation to share Kapitan's interest in helping the decision-making determinist escape inconsistency; in the second place, this goal is achieved just as well by (D) as by (C), and thus provides no grounds for preferring the latter over the former. If anything, (D) is a better choice on these grounds; for unless there is backward causation of present events by future events, only past events are relevant to determinism, and all the beliefs about future events which distinguish (C) from (D) are simply excess baggage.

(ii) Another point in favour of (C), Kapitan avers, is that it 'squares nicely with the response of the deliberator who, when asked if he is aware of anything which determines his eventual decision or what that decision will be, reports: "Not at all; *as far as I know* it is entirely up to me which alternative I choose".'[38] But this is no better than (i). The phrase in italics suggests that the openness relevant to deliberation is doxastic in nature, but this is all it suggests; thus it gives (C) an advantage over (A) and (B), but not over (D). Moreover, the deliberator does not refer in his response to everything he knows, but only to knowledge relevant to whether his choice is entirely up to him. For this purpose, (D) is quite sufficient – the extra (fore)knowledge contained in (C) is not even relevant to this purpose. And even if the deliberator held some belief about the future from which he could infer his eventual decision, this would provide him with no reason for doubting that his choice is 'up to him' unless he also held some belief(s) about the past from which he could deduce his future decision.

(iii) But all we need is a 'minimal type of openness' which 'seems integral to decision-making, in which case (C), at least, is assured'.[39] To the contrary, (C) does *not* define a minimal type of openness for purposes of decision-making, since (D) – which is equivalent to (C) minus beliefs about the future – is more minimal still.

(iv) (C) expresses 'the agent's *cautious* assumption of efficacy; he must take his choice to be efficacious *within* circumstances as he himself under-

[37] *Ibid.* [38] *Ibid.* pp. 111–12. [39] *Ibid.* p. 112.

stands them, though he might allow that unforeseen factors will prevent success'.[40] The short response to this rationale for (C) is that future states-of-affairs – which (D) excludes and (C) tolerates – are not constitutive of the circumstances within which one acts, and consequently the agent's beliefs about them should (for a rational agent, anyway) have no effect on his estimation of efficacy. (Recall our earlier discussion of the fatalistic bombing victim.)

(v) Finally, we are told that (C) is nevertheless sufficient for (A) and (B) when the agent is omniscient, 'so nothing beyond [the minimal] (C) need here be assumed'.[41] This appeal seems to be addressed to anyone who is tempted to choose (A) or (B), pointing out to such a person that (C), on the supposition of an omniscient agent, includes whatever advantages (A) or (B) might be thought to possess. But this again assumes (incorrectly) that the choice is between (A), (B) and (C). Moreover, it is only because (C) is *maximal* rather than minimal for an omniscient agent that it can be sufficient for (A) and (B). Ironically, the relation between the various sets to which (v) draws attention, far from supporting (C), actually helps to clarify what is wrong with (C). Just as (C) is sufficient for (A) *and* (B) when the agent is omniscient, so (D) is sufficient for (B) *but not for* (*A*). (D)'s failure to sanction (A) is much to (D)'s credit. By incorporating all truths into the set by which openness is defined, (A) leaves no truths open. While this result is acceptable with respect to the past, it is not acceptable with respect to the future; virtually everyone would thus reject (A), even in contexts (such as metaphysical freedom) in which openness is not doxastic. But an omniscient being who regards (C) as the crucial set for purposes of agential openness would in effect be regarding (A) in the same light. By so regarding it, this being has adopted the stance of a *fatalist*. Since fatalism rests on modal fallacies which even human thinkers are capable of detecting, any omniscient agent who accepts (C) as the standard of openness is being irrational (if indeed it is possible to be both omniscient and irrational). Certainly God, as traditionally conceived, would not make this mistake. In its rivalry with (D), (C) is the hands-down loser.

In sum, Kapitan's varied attempts to bolster premise (5) by grounding the contingency of agential openness in the totality of an agent's beliefs are unpersuasive. Since the two arguments considered earlier in this section were also failures, it appears that the case for (5) is doomed.

With the double collapse of premises (3) and (5), the critique of omniscient agency based on those premises must be abandoned. Moreover, it is not clear how any critique of omniscient agency based on (P_3) could dispense with these two premises. Such a critique requires that divine foreknowledge antedate divine intentions and that foreknowledge be incompatible with

[40] *Ibid.* [41] *Ibid.*

agential openness. It is hard to see how either of these pillars of the (P_3)-strategy could survive the criticisms that have been levelled against premises (3) and (5). The traditional theist is therefore justified in regarding omniprescient agency as a coherent notion. Of course, the theist may wish for more than coherence: in particular, he may wish for full-blooded divine *deliberation* (in which case the threat posed by (P_1) must still be faced);[42] or he may wish that the *use* as well as the *possession* of foreknowledge might be compatible with divine agency.[43] Nevertheless, as he faces these further tasks, it is reassuring to know that omniprescient agency does not belong in the same company as round squares and married bachelors.

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[42] David Basinger discusses why a theist might hold out for full-blooded deliberation in 'Omniscience and Deliberation: A Response to Reichenbach', *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, xx (1986), 169–72.

[43] For a discussion of this issue, see my 'Divine Providence and Simple Foreknowledge', *op. cit.*