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OF GOD AND FREEDOM

NELSON PIKE has recently contended that the existence of an essentially omniscient God is incompatible with anyone's acting freely, because it is incompatible with anyone's having the power to refrain from acting as he does.¹ Pike argues as follows. Suppose that such a God exists, and that Jones does X at t_2 . It follows that God truly believes at t_1 that Jones does X at t_2 . If it were within Jones's power to refrain from X at t_2 , then it would be within Jones's power to bring it about that God does not exist at t_1 , or that God does not hold that belief at t_1 , or that God's belief at t_1 is false. Since all three of these powers are contradictory (that is, the notion of each involves inconsistency), it is not in Jones's power to refrain from X at t_2 . Hence Jones does not do X freely and, indeed, for the same reasons, no one ever does anything freely. Thus the existence of an essentially omniscient God is incompatible with anyone's having the power to refrain from acting as he does and, therefore, is incompatible with anyone's acting freely.

With regard to the third of the three aforementioned powers, Jones's power to bring it about that God's belief at t_1 is false, it is important to see that the contradiction involved in such a power is not due to a causal sense of "bring about." When one so acts that a previous belief is false, one may be said to falsify the belief, or cause it to be false. But this means only that the belief in fact is false. This being clear, we may admit that there is, indeed, a contradiction involved in the idea of the power in question, and that is simply the contradiction involved in the idea of an essentially omniscient being holding a false belief.

Since the latter, and third, of the foregoing three powers is contradictory, it *seems* clear that if it were within Jones's power to refrain from X at t_2 , then at least one of the other two powers would be his: either the power to bring it about that God does not exist at t_1 or the power to bring it about that at t_1 God does not hold the above-mentioned belief. I wish now to argue that although these powers are contradictory, and hence are not his, Jones nevertheless may have it within his power to refrain from X at t_2 . In particular, I shall claim that Pike is mistaken in thinking that such powers are relevant to the situation.

¹ See "Divine Omniscience and Voluntary Action," *Philosophical Review*, LXXIV (1965), 27-46.

I take Pike to be using "bring about" in its causal sense, in connection with these two powers. Now, of course, it is contradictory to suppose that Jones has either of these powers: for it is contradictory to speak of a later situation causing an earlier situation, and consequently, it is contradictory to speak of its being in Jones's power to do something at t_2 which causes God not to exist, or not to have a certain belief, at t_1 . But, while such powers are contradictory, there is no good reason to think that Jones must possess such powers if he has the power to refrain from X at t_2 . The power to refrain from X at t_2 is, indeed, the power so to act at t_2 that either God does not exist at t_1 or else God does not at t_1 believe that Jones will do X at t_2 . But Jones's so acting at t_2 would not bring it about that God does not exist at t_1 , or that God does not hold a certain belief at t_1 , any more than Jones's doing X at t_2 brings it about that God believes, at t_1 , that Jones will do X at t_2 . Jones's power so to act at t_2 is simply his power to perform an act such that if that act were performed, then certain earlier situations would be different from what in fact they are. If one wishes, one may use "bring about" in this latter, and noncausal, sense: it is possible that Pike was using the expression in this sense and, if so, the use seems misleading. But misleading or not, there is nothing contradictory in it.

Pike might say that the latter seems as contradictory as the former: that it seems contradictory to suppose that one has the power so to act that earlier situations would be other than in fact they are. But I see nothing contradictory in it. If one were to exercise such a power, then earlier situations would be other than in fact they are. Similarly, there is no contradiction in supposing that one has the power so to act that later situations would be other than in fact they are: for example, if Jones does X at t_2 , and God truly believes at t_3 that Jones does X at t_2 , Jones may nevertheless have the power to refrain from X at t_2 ; if he were to refrain from X at t_2 , then later situations would be other than in fact they are.

Pike might say that the crucial difference between the foregoing two suppositions is being ignored: it is God's believing, *in advance*, that Jones will do X which compels him to do X . But if we avoid the confusion of thinking that this means it is somehow *true before*² Jones does X that he will do X , then we ought to be able to see that this makes no difference to the problem at hand: our freedom is no more infringed

² Pike does not make this mistake (see *ibid.*, pp. 35-36). For a brief discussion of the confusion involved in the ascription of a time to truth, cf. sec. 7 of my "Fatalism and Ordinary Language," *The Journal of Philosophy*, LXII (1965), 211-222.

by God's previously believing that we will act in a certain manner than it is by His later believing that we did act in a certain manner; we will never perform an act which conflicts with His beliefs, no matter what the dates of these beliefs. Surely there is no more contradiction in saying that one has the power so to act that past situations would be other than in fact they are, than in saying that one has the power so to act that future situations would be other than in fact they are. Of course, we do not so act that either past or future situations are other than they are: but it does not follow from this that we lack the power so to act that they would be other than they are.

For example, suppose that at t_1 I decide to skip at t_2 rather than run at t_2 , that conditions are "normal" at t_1 and t_2 (I have not been hypnotized, drugged, threatened, manhandled, and so forth), and that I have the ability (know-how) both to skip and to run. Suppose, too, that the world happens to be governed by empirical laws such that if ever a man in my particular circumstances were to make a decision of this kind, then he would not change his mind and do something else but would follow through upon his decision: suppose, that is, that, under the circumstances which prevail at t_1 , my decision is empirically sufficient for my skipping at t_2 . Clearly, it is in my power to run at t_2 , since I know how to do so and the conditions for the exercise of this ability are normal. If I were to exercise this power then I would not, at t_1 , have decided to skip at t_2 or else the circumstances at t_1 would have been different. Hence my power to run is a power so to act that an earlier situation would be other than in fact it is: it is the power to perform an act such that if it were performed then either I would not at t_1 have decided to skip at t_2 or else the circumstances at t_1 would have been different.

It will not do to say that in such a situation I do not have the power to do anything but skip at t_2 : this would be to allow (the nonsense) that, under normal conditions, my own decision renders me powerless to do anything but what I do. All of this is commonplace, and only seems to cause trouble when we confusedly think that this involves the causation of earlier events by later events or, worse still, the "alteration" of the earlier by the later—for example, that it might be that while it was once true that I decided at t_1 to skip at t_2 , it now is false that I so decided. This, of course, is nonsense whose blandishments we had best resist.³ It may, more plausibly, be objected that, since, under the

³ See Pike, *op. cit.*, p. 33. For a more detailed examination of these and related points, cf. Saunders, *op. cit.*

circumstances, my decision to skip is empirically sufficient for my skipping, it is not in my power to change my mind and run instead. But although it (logically) cannot be both that my decision, under the circumstances, is empirically sufficient for my doing what I decide to do and also that I change my mind and do not do it, it does not follow that it is not in my power to change my mind and run instead. It follows only that I do not change my mind and run instead: for the fact that I know how to run, together with the fact that it is my own decision, under normal conditions, which leads me to persevere in my decision and to skip rather than to run, logically guarantees that I skip of my own free will and, accordingly, that it is in my power to change my mind and run. To maintain the contrary would be to suppose that some sort of indeterminism is essential to human freedom, on grounds that if ever, under normal conditions, my own decision is empirically sufficient for my doing what I do, then my own decision compels me to do what I do. I cannot see that it would in any way infringe a man's freedom if the world happened to be such that, as a matter of empirical law, if ever under certain normal conditions a man were to decide to perform an act of a certain kind, then he would not change his mind but would carry out that decision. To suppose otherwise would be, I think, to approximate the error of confusing causation with compulsion.

An objector may persist: "Once the decision is made you could not exercise the power to change your mind and run, and hence you would have no such power." I agree that a power which could not be exercised is not a power, but I deny that the power could not be exercised: rather it is the case that under these circumstances I *would* not exercise the power. We have supposed only that the world happens to be such that if ever a certain kind of decision were made under certain normal conditions, then the agent would carry out his resolve and would not later change his mind and do something else. This is not to suppose that the agent's decision somehow destroys his power to do anything else, but rather that, in such cases, he would always continue to prefer the action upon which he had decided. "But even if he wanted to do something else, how could he?" Suppose it is true that if he wanted to do something else then he would change his mind and do it. In that case he will not want to do something else.

I do not mean to suggest that the God-Jones example and the skip-run example are thoroughly parallel: they are not. In particular, in the former example it is in virtue of certain theological considerations that one may have the power so to act that the past would be other

than it is, while in the latter example one has this power in virtue of nontheological considerations. Nevertheless, it is an important respect in which the examples are parallel upon which I wish to dwell: that in both cases one may have the power so to act that the past would be other than it is. Since we can see clearly that this idea involves no contradiction in the skip-run example, I believe that this will help us to see that it also involves no contradiction in the God-Jones example. Once it is granted, as we have granted it, that it is contradictory to suppose that Jones has the power so to act that God holds a false belief at t_1 , it is important to realize that the remainder of Pike's case rests upon no special theological considerations, but simply on the contention (which I repudiate) that it is contradictory to suppose that one has the power so to act that the past would be other than it is (specifically, the power so to act that a person who in fact existed would not have existed or that a belief which in fact was held would not have been held).⁴

The following consideration may also be of assistance in freeing us from the temptation to suppose that such a power involves contradiction. The proposition that there is an essentially omniscient God who believes at t_1 that Jones will do X at t_2 is a proposition which entails the proposition that Jones will do X at t_2 . Hence the fact that there is an essentially omniscient God who believes at t_1 that Jones will do X at t_2 is, among other things, the fact that Jones will do X at t_2 . Now, of course, it cannot be both that Jones refrains from X at t_2 and also that an essentially omniscient God believes at t_1 that Jones will do X at t_2 . But this cannot be, *only* because it cannot be both that Jones will do X at t_2 and also that Jones refrains from X at t_2 : we may not deduce the necessity of an event from the fact of its occurrence. Pike has so described the situation at t_1 that one of the facts about it is that a belief at t_1 is followed by Jones's doing X at t_2 . It is, then, unproblematic that if Jones were to exercise his power to refrain from X at t_2 , then this situation would be other than in fact it is. Since the situation is described as a situation in which an essentially omniscient God holds a certain belief at t_1 , we are tempted to think that this is a situation which has to do only with t_1 . If we succumb to this temptation, we may then be led to think that something which has to do only with t_1 somehow guarantees what later happens at t_2 . In this case, we may indeed find it hard to understand how Jones could have the power to refrain from X at t_2 . But to succumb to this temptation is to forget

⁴ See Pike, *op. cit.*, p. 34, points (4) and (5).

that the situation is so described that Jones does X at t_2 .⁵ Of course, Jones's power to refrain from X at t_2 is a power so to act that the past would be other than it is: for the past has been described as standing in a certain relationship to t_2 , as being such that what happens in the past is followed at t_2 by Jones's doing X . Whenever one has the power to do Y but does X instead, one has the power so to act that past would be other than it is: for if one were to do Y , then every past situation would be other than it is in that it would be followed by one's Y -ing at this time rather than by one's X -ing at this time. Although it is true that if I had refrained from writing this paper in 1965, then Cæsar's assassination would have been other than it is in that it would not have preceded by 2009 years my writing of this paper, it would be absurd to argue that I therefore did not have it in my power to refrain from writing the paper in 1965. Once this is seen, we may realize both that it is not contradictory, in the case at hand, to suppose that Jones has the power to refrain from X at t_2 , and also that God's essential omniscience is irrelevant to the issue of human freedom.

Once it is clear that one may have the power so to act that the past would be other than in fact it is, we ought also to take a closer look at the relations between "acting freely," "in one's power," and "ability" (in the sense of know-how). One acts freely to the extent that one has it in one's power to refrain from so acting, and vice versa: that is, one (who does X) does X freely to the extent that one has it in one's power to refrain from X , and one (who does X) has the power to refrain from X to the extent that one does X freely. The conditions for the one are the conditions for the other. Thus, as in our skip-run example, the power to do something else—for example, run—goes hand in hand with skipping of one's own free will, the latter being just what, in that example, I do. In order to determine the extent to which one is acting freely (and, correlatively, the extent to which other acts are within one's power), we must answer the following questions. What have I the ability (know-how) to do? How normal (in the

⁵ This becomes most apparent, perhaps, if we notice the following. By definition, an essentially omniscient God is a God whose essence is such that, for any time t_n He believes at t_n that p , if and only if p . Hence Pike's description of the situation, as one in which there exists an essentially omniscient God who believes at t_1 that Jones does X at t_2 , must include the proposition, "There exists a God whose essence is such that, for any time t_n He believes at t_n that p , if and only if p , and who believes at t_1 that Jones does X at t_2 ." But the latter description is synonymous with "There exists a God whose essence is such that, for any time t_n He believes at t_n that p , if and only if p , and Jones does X at t_2 ."

foregoing sense of “normal”) are the conditions for the exercise of my abilities? My power to refrain from X at t_2 , or to do something other than X at t_2 , may be said to be limited to the extent that my ability to do things other than X is limited (for example, I may not have the ability to run), and to the extent that conditions for the exercise of my abilities are abnormal (for example, I may be told, “It’s skip or be shot, cowpoke”). It is noteworthy that I may be powerless to perform an act because I lack the ability to perform such acts, or because, although I have the ability, I am *prevented* from exercising that ability owing to abnormal conditions. One interesting sort of abnormal condition is the lack of requisite resources: for example, I may be powerless to paint at t_2 , not because I lack the ability to paint, but because I have no paint. (This is not the place for the more detailed examination which the foregoing rough distinctions deserve.)

It is considerations of *these* sorts which seem to me to bear upon the questions of freedom and power, and I think it is only confusion which leads us to deem divine omniscience to be so much as relevant to such matters.

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