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David P. Hunt

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PRESCIENCE AND PROVIDENCE: A REPLY TO MY CRITICS

David P. Hunt

I respond to the two critiques of my position on the providential usefulness of simple foreknowledge. Professor Kapitan objects that I have not directly addressed his main argument against deliberating while holding a belief about the outcome of the deliberation. Perhaps he is right; in any event, I address that argument here and find it wanting. Professor Basinger focuses his attack on my scenario for divine decision-making. I reply that he has misunderstood the role of that scenario, that his proffered counterexample fails, and that it would not refute my position even if it succeeded.

I am delighted that my defense of the traditional view on providence and foreknowledge has attracted the attention of two of the most able spokesmen for the opposing view. I am not much persuaded by what they say on behalf of the new consensus, but I welcome the opportunity offered by their remarks to extend and clarify my own position.

Let me begin with the essay by Professor Kapitan. The bulk of his paper is devoted to what I shall refer to as his “main argument” in support of the Doxastic Principle; this is followed by a restatement of his position on a key example discussed in my paper, and the application of his main argument to my suggested scenario for divine decision-making. I shall take these in reverse order.

My only comment on Kapitan’s discussion of my decision-making scenario is that he is wrong to read it as a process that occurs over time. The scenario merely sets forth the order of *dependence* among the key elements in God’s practical reasoning: the initial conditional decisions, simple foreknowledge, practical conclusions, and providential acts. The relations of logical priority among these items are independent of whether they subsist in time or in some eternal present. The latter is immune to Kapitan’s critique; as for the former, my response will have to await an examination of Kapitan’s main argument.

If Kapitan has misinterpreted my account of divine decision-making, I am prepared to allow that I have misinterpreted his position on Quinn’s Smith-White example. He denies holding the view I attributed to him, according to which a conditional decision is merely implemented when its antecedent is satisfied; instead, he asserts that antecedent-satisfaction is the occasion for a distinct decision, guided by the original conditional decision. If this is his



view, however, we must ask whether it is consistent with his support for the Doxastic Principle.

Assuming that two decisions are made by Smith with regard to White's invitation, how should these decisions be characterized? The obvious answer is that they are of the following form (the phrase in square brackets indicating the content of the decision):

Decision I: X decides at t_1 [to do A if C obtains].

Decision II: X decides at t_2 (when C obtains) [to do A].

But if we accept this characterization of the two decisions, Kapitan's thesis requires not only that no belief about Decision I should immediately precede that decision, but that no belief about Decision II should immediately precede *that* decision. Now if X comes to believe subsequent to Decision I but prior to the obtaining of C that C *will* obtain, and on this basis comes to believe further that he will do A (since Decision I has already been made and is thus available for inference), then it seems that X might hold an immediately prior belief about a decision that has not yet been made (since Decision II occurs when C obtains, and C does not yet obtain). Clearly the game is lost for Kapitan if he does not do something about Decision II.

If I now understand him correctly, his response is not to replace Decision II with a *non*-decision (e.g., a mere *implementation*); rather, it is to replace Decision II with another decision, perhaps

Decision III: X decides at t_3 (when X comes to believe that C will obtain) [to do A when C obtains].

This decision comes before or simultaneous with the belief, not later. If this is Kapitan's position, our disagreement is really over whether there are any cases of X coming to believe prior to t_2 that he will do A which follow the Decision I+II model, or whether all cases of this type conform to the Decision I+III model. My own view is that, while the Smith-White case might plausibly be assimilated to the I+III model, Sally's case is most naturally interpreted as belonging to the I+II variety. Sally has committed herself to making a decision which depends on the toss of the coin. If this commitment is sufficiently strong to survive the foreknowledge that she will decide in favor of Chester (as I see no reason for denying), then she will make a decision whose form will correspond to Decision II rather than Decision III. But a full defense of this view (which I am undertaking elsewhere) would take me beyond the page limits which the Editor has imposed on my reply, so I shall turn now to an examination of Kapitan's main argument.

I should first of all note that the objection Kapitan raises against my formulation of (DP) is of course correct, and I am willing to accept his (DP*) in the role I had assigned to (DP).¹ At the same time, none of the objections to (DP) in my original paper is traceable to the flaw which Kapitan identifies

and corrects in moving to (DP*); insofar as I have succeeded in raising any doubts about (DP), then, those doubts are inherited by (DP*). Kapitan understands this, and therefore undertakes to lay out a positive case for (DP*), one which rests on two planks. The first is (DO), the principle that decision-making presupposes a belief in the openness of the future—what I shall refer to as *doxastic openness*. The second is a particular account of what doxastic openness involves. I have no quarrel with (DO), which is why (as Kapitan correctly notes) I never contest it in my paper. My problem concerns Kapitan's account of doxastic openness.

Kapitan begins his account unexceptionably enough: for an action A to be doxastically open for an agent X at time t, X must presume or take himself to believe both (i) that his A-ing or not A-ing is dependent on his decision, and (ii) that his decision is still (at t) contingent. Now if the presumption of doxastic openness, so understood, is to prevent the agent from simultaneously holding an (accessed) belief about his future action, it is hard to see how clause (i) could be the source of the trouble. If X believes that he will A, he may further believe that he will A because he will decide to A, in which case clause (i) would be satisfied. If such beliefs necessarily preclude doxastic openness, it must be owing to clause (ii). And indeed, this appears to be Kapitan's view as well, since he focuses his defense of (DP*) on the proper construal of 'contingency' and its implications.

What we learn about 'contingency' as it appears in clause (ii) is that it is not a mere logical or nomological modality; rather, it is a relative modality, meaning that the contingency in question is *relative to* some set of propositions S. But the mere fact that p is noncontingent relative to some S is hardly sufficient to render p doxastically closed, for there is *always* an S (e.g., {p}) with respect to which p is noncontingent; it is also necessary that the propositions constituting S, with respect to which X believes his decision to be noncontingent, should be relevant to the issue of doxastic openness. Kapitan identifies the relevant S as propositions about "prevailing circumstances" or "circumstances as they now stand." He is right to qualify S in this way, for obvious reasons. Propositions about circumstances which do not yet obtain are simply irrelevant to what is contingent *now*. By restricting S to "prevailing" circumstances, Kapitan appears to be rejecting the blandishments of fatalism, which regards *all* circumstances (including those that will not prevail until some future date) as relevant to determining what lies open. Applying this understanding of relative contingency to clause (ii), Kapitan therefore concludes that "an agent *takes* a course of action to be open only by *assuming* that both it and its complement are possible given *circumstances as they now stand* [emphases added]."²

I am simply at a loss how it is that Kapitan moves from this conception of doxastic openness to the claim at the end of the succeeding paragraph that

“a suitably rational and self-reflective agent who already believes that he will do A takes the future to the ‘fixed’ or ‘settled’ with respect to his A-ing, not ‘open.’”³ Kapitan’s own analysis of doxastic openness rightly restricts the relevant beliefs to those about *circumstances as they now stand*, and the belief that one *will* do A is not a belief about circumstances as they *now* stand; therefore it cannot compel a “suitably rational and self-reflective agent” to regard the future as “fixed” or “settled” rather than “open.” Any agent who arrived at such a conclusion would only be demonstrating his susceptibility to the modal fallacies underlying fatalism. While some agents might make (and indeed have made) such a mistake, we can be confident that an inerrant deity would never be deceived in this way.

In light of the foregoing, I see no reason to retract what I said in my original paper:

But why must Sally’s belief that she will marry Chester undermine her belief in an open future? She has no grounds for supposing that she *must* marry Chester, or that she *can’t* pursue another course of action. If she nevertheless looks upon her future as closed, it only proves that she is as credulous about fatalism as she is about fortune-tellers.⁴

The failure of Kapitan’s main argument simply reinforces the point.

I turn now to the essay by Professor Basinger, which focuses exclusively on the conditional decision scenario (or ‘CDS,’ as I shall now refer to it) to be found at the end of my paper. He unfortunately begins by misrepresenting my position, perhaps not altogether culpably, and while this mistake does not directly affect his argument it is nevertheless worth correcting. He apparently understands me to be accepting both the Metaphysical and the Doxastic Problem as genuine, and then introducing the CDS as a way to “circumvent” these problems. Now Basinger is partially correct regarding my position on the Metaphysical Problem: my whole approach to that problem in the paper is to grant the Metaphysical Principle and then show how God can circumvent it. But he is *only* partially correct: the fact that I grant the principle for the sake of argument does not mean that I believe it to be true, and my favorable reference to David Lewis’s view of the matter should indicate that I share his doubts. Basinger is not even partially correct regarding my position on the Doxastic Problem, since I explicitly reject the Doxastic Principle upon which that problem rests. I will nevertheless accept a small measure of blame if the following speculation about the source of Basinger’s error is accurate.

It may have seemed to Basinger, first, that the CDS *does* circumvent, or at any rate is *designed* to circumvent, the Doxastic Problem; and second, that there could be no point to my circumventing this problem if I did not regard it as genuine. But neither of these premises is correct. In the first place, the only feature of the CDS which might suggest that it circumvents the Doxastic Problem is that it locates a key providential decision prior to the exercise of

divine foreknowledge (while preserving a useful role for foreknowledge with respect to a subsequent decision). But this suggestion is misleading, since the CDS concerns only *logical* priority, while the Doxastic Principle is a thesis regarding *temporal* priority. Thus God's knowledge and decisions may be logically related in the manner set forth in the CDS while remaining temporally related in the way proscribed by the Doxastic Principle. And indeed this is the case: though the foreknowledge of an eternally omniscient Deity may be logically subsequent to His conditional decisions, He nevertheless possesses that foreknowledge *while* making those decisions. This is just what the Doxastic Principle rules out. So the CDS, despite appearances, offers nothing to vitiate a direct conflict with the Doxastic Principle. Kapitan at least understands this, since he justifies his dismissal of the CDS by referring back to his earlier defense of the Doxastic Principle. Quite right: if the Doxastic Principle is true, omniprescient deliberation is a lost cause—at least nothing in the CDS can serve to rehabilitate it.

In the second place, since I do not offer the CDS as a means of circumventing the Doxastic Problem, there must be some other point to that scenario. But what is that point? It is here that I am willing to share some of the blame with Basinger, for I see now that the point of the CDS is not made sufficiently clear in the paper, and Basinger may not be the only reader who inferred a point different from the one I intended. So let me clear up the confusion forthwith. At the juncture where I introduce the CDS I regard myself (rightly or wrongly) as having *already* shown that the Metaphysical Problem (whether genuine or not) is circumventable, and that the Doxastic Problem (whether circumventable or not) is not genuine. But these results are purely negative, and I wanted to conclude the paper with some *positive* suggestion for how God might put His foreknowledge to providential use, given the maneuvering room opened up by my critique of the Metaphysical and Doxastic Problems. This is the role I intended the CDS to play in the paper. If it succeeds in this role, it is pure gain, while if it does not succeed, my basic argument against the new consensus remains unaffected.

So there is less riding on the CDS than Basinger supposes. I am nevertheless prepared to defend it. Basinger develops his argument through an analysis of a test case involving a young woman named 'Sue' who prays for guidance regarding a marriage proposal from a young man named 'Tom.' Basinger employs this case, not on behalf of the two problems I address in the paper (which he claims I have successfully circumvented), but in order to raise a new problem. As he sees it, the price of avoiding the Metaphysical and Doxastic Problems by adopting a conditional decision strategy is that divine actions guided by this strategy cannot increase God's providential control. In order for the CDS to make a genuine contribution toward God's providential ends, the antecedents describing the conditions under which God

would respond in the ways set forth in the consequents must include information sufficient for God to judge that there is some point to His intervention. In the case of Sue and Tom, for example, the mere fact that Tom will die in a tragic auto accident is insufficient: the antecedent must be enriched to include information connecting Tom's death with some good to be achieved (or evil avoided) through God's advising Sue to reject his proposal. Basinger's contention is that when all providentially relevant information is packed into the antecedent, the CDS collapses.

Before seeing how Basinger backs up this charge, I wish to note that he is absolutely correct in pointing out that the antecedents employed in the CDS may often require considerable enrichment before becoming providentially useful. (The antecedent of Basinger's D1, for instance, surely needs to be fleshed out with information about the kind of person Sue is.) I did not go into this in my paper because it did not seem to me that anything in my argument hinged on whether those conditional decisions were simple or complex. It is certainly open to a critic to argue that I was wrong in this assumption; but Basinger's argument to this effect is unpersuasive on a number of counts.

Basinger proposes two ways that God's conditional decision regarding His advice to Sue might be rendered providentially useful. The first of these, expressed in Basinger's D2, is to include in the antecedent information about the outcome of God's decision-making. Does He end up advising Sue against marriage? If so, does Sue accept and act on His advice? Does her action conduce toward the good that God desires for her (and others)? But this way of saving the CDS won't work, Basinger argues, because divine knowledge of such an antecedent (enriched with answers to these questions) must conflict with divine agency. It is incompatible with God's action resulting from a *decision*, for this implies the possibility of God deciding otherwise, and "even God is not free to do what he knows he will not do";⁵ and it is incompatible with God's action increasing His providential *control*, for He already knows whether His purposes will be advanced, and any action He might take in light of that knowledge is therefore pointless: if what He knows is that His ends will *not* be achieved, then providential intervention in the situation must be inefficacious, and if what He knows is that His ends *will* be achieved, this will happen "regardless of the type of activity D2 directs God to implement."⁶

I confess that I find this part of Basinger's argument a bit baffling. The outcome of God's decision-making, which Basinger regards as "relevant information," strikes me as utterly irrelevant—at least I can't imagine what it is supposed to be relevant *for*. Presumably what counts in this context is relevance for divine decision-making. This is enhanced when the antecedents of the CDS are enriched with *reasons* for God to perform the actions described in the consequents. But the fact that God *will* do A cannot be a reason

for His deciding *to* do A. How then could knowledge of this fact enhance God's providential position? This strategy for antecedent enrichment is simply a non-starter.

Basinger, of course, introduces this strategy in order to show that it is unavailable to me. He is right about this, but only for the reason just adumbrated, not for the reasons that he himself cites. His first reason, that "even God is not free to do what he knows he will not do," I assume to be an instance of the more general claim that

- (1) x is not free to do what x knows he [x] will not do,

rather than

- (2) x is not free to do what God knows x will not do.

These point to distinct foreknowledge problems, and (2) is neither addressed in my paper nor possessed of the uncontroversial character which would allow Basinger to cite it so confidently in support of his position.⁷ (1), however, is simply false: surely I can know that I will eat tomorrow without thereby losing the freedom to refrain from eating tomorrow. What Basinger presumably has in mind here is rather

- (1') x cannot *decide* to do what x knows he [x] will not do.

But Basinger never explains why this principle ought to be accepted. He could perhaps point to (DP) (or (DP*)) and urge that (1') be accepted on the same grounds, but the cogency of these grounds is precisely what is in dispute. Basinger cannot hope to confute my position simply by reaffirming the very principle that I reject.

His second reason for dismissing D2, as we saw, is that foreknowledge of its antecedent cannot increase God's providential control. But we must ask: increase beyond *what*? If the benchmark is simply *what will be*, then of course it is impossible for God to use His foreknowledge to exceed this benchmark; but this is only because it is impossible for anyone to bring about a state-of-affairs consisting of the future being different from what it will be, an impossibility that has nothing to do with foreknowledge and the alleged uselessness thereof. If, on the other hand, the benchmark is *what would have been*, then Basinger offers no reason for thinking that God could not draw on His foreknowledge to exceed this benchmark: if the antecedent conditions that God foreknows to obtain include both the fact that Tom will die a tragic death and the fact that the best for Sue will come about, the latter may be the happy result of God having used His foreknowledge of the former to advise Sue against marriage, thus constituting a providential gain over the result that would have obtained if God had not relied on His foreknowledge to advise Sue as He did. Basinger's mistake here is reminiscent of the fallacy in one of the classic arguments for fatalism: either I will be hit by a car while

crossing this street, or I won't; if I will, any precautions I take will be ineffective; if I won't, any precautions I take will be unnecessary; therefore it is pointless to take precautions. While this fallacious instance of Constructive Dilemma involves antecedent truth and Basinger's involves antecedent knowledge, I see nothing in Basinger's argument to show why this should make a difference. If antecedent truth does not render precautions pointless, it is unclear why *knowledge* of antecedent truth should persuade a rational agent that precautions are pointless.

So the antecedent enrichment strategy offered by D2 does not rule out enhancement of divine decision-making, as Basinger avers. Its real problem, as I pointed out, is that it misidentifies the sort of information that would lead to a real improvement in God's providential position. What D3 offers is at least relevant to this end, so Basinger's critique of this strategy is a rather more serious affair.

D3 replaces information about what *will* result from God's decision on advising Sue with information about what God might *reasonably expect* to result from His decision. Basinger expresses this information probabilistically, enriching the antecedent of D3 with

- (3) If Sue refuses Tom's proposal, what is best for her will probably come about.

Now Basinger's critique of this strategy may be formulated in the following way. Exactly one of these four propositions must be true:

- (4) Sue refuses Tom's proposal and what is best for her comes about.
 (4') Sue refuses Tom's proposal and what is best for her does not come about.
 (5) Sue does not refuse Tom's proposal and what is best for her comes about.
 (5') Sue does not refuse Tom's proposal and what is best for her does not come about.

God therefore knows one of these propositions to be true. Suppose it is (4) or (4'). But if God believes either of these propositions, He cannot also believe (3): knowledge of what *will be* must override beliefs about what *will probably be*. Suppose then that God believes either (5) or (5'). This is compatible with His also believing (3); unfortunately, He knows (in virtue of knowing (5) or (5')) that (3) is providentially irrelevant. So whichever of these propositions God believes, He cannot draw upon (3) in order to enhance His providential control.

Basinger's treatment of (5) and (5') involves him in the same fallacy we exposed in discussing D2. The fact that I do not take precautions in crossing the street does not make it practically irrelevant that, *were* I to take precautions, I would probably get to the other side safely. Likewise the fact that Sue does not refuse Tom's proposal does not make it providentially irrelevant that,

were Sue to refuse his proposal, what is best for her would probably come about (indeed, if Sue accepts the proposal, it may be because God refrained from advising her against it). So if (3) is true, then whether or not Sue refuses (and God *knows* that she refuses), God has the power, through advising Sue against marriage, to bring about conditions in which the achievement of His providential ends is more likely. What more is required for God's foreknowledge of Tom's death to be providentially useful?

So much for (5) and (5'). Basinger's treatment of (4) and (4'), however, involves him in some new mistakes. I shall mention three.

(i) We ordinarily accept as true such statements as

- (6) There is a probability of 1/6 that this die will come up 6 on the next throw,

while granting that either

- (7) This die will come up 6 on the next throw

or

- (7') It is not the case that this die will come up 6 on the next throw

is also true. But if (6) and (7) may both be true, why not (3) and (4)? If (6) and (7'), why not (3) and (4')? Of course, if probability is an ineluctably epistemic notion, it may not be possible to *believe* both members of these pairs. But Basinger gives no reasons for adopting this interpretation of probability as it functions in (3).

(ii) Even if he could defend the concept of probability required by his argument, it would be irrelevant to the CDS. Suppose, e.g., that (6) and (7) are *not* cotenable; the latter will still be cotenable with

- (6*) There is a probability of 1/6 that a *fair 6-sided die* will come up 6 on the next throw.

And even if (3) and (4) are not cotenable, the latter is surely cotenable with

- (3*) If *someone with properties* $P_1 \dots P_j$ *avoids marriage under conditions* $C_1 \dots C_k$, what is best for that person will probably come about.

But it is (3*), not (3), which is at work in the CDS. God's conditional decisions are reached logically prior to the actualization of a particular world, and thus must contain general terms rather than proper names. When reparsed in this way, the antecedents of D3 will all be accessible to divine belief despite God's knowledge of (4) or (4').

(iii) Basinger actually argues as follows:

To believe that something will quite *probably* come about—as opposed to knowing with certainty that it will come about—is to acknowledge that it is *possible* that it might not come about. But if God *knows* in W that Sue will in fact refuse Tom's proposal and that it *will* in fact be best that she did, then

God cannot simultaneously believe in W that it is even possible that what is best for Sue *might not* in fact come about if the proposal is refused.⁸

But Basinger is stepping here into another fatalistic trap. The usual “branching” view of the future, accepted by libertarians and (most) determinists alike, is that while a particular future *will* be actual, alternative futures are nevertheless (at least logically) *possible*. Now if this is true, why can’t God believe it? Why can’t God believe both that Sue refuses and prospers in the actual world *and* that she refuses and languishes in some merely possible world? Basinger seems to be saying that God cannot believe both these things because they are *not* jointly true: if something *will* be the case, then it’s not even *possible* that it *not* be the case. But then Basinger is a fatalist.

So there are a number of ways in which D3 can evade Basinger’s attack. He could always mount a new attack, perhaps meeting with greater success. But even if he managed to show that God’s simple foreknowledge is providentially impotent in the case of Sue and Tom, he would still have to show that this is a *representative* case if he is to generalize from it to the conclusion that my defense of the traditional view is “flawed in principle.” This is impossible, however, since his example is not representative. A significant feature of Basinger’s example is that God’s purpose in acting as He does is achieved only if (i) His action leads to *something else* (beyond the action itself), and (ii) other agents are cooperative. Will Sue take God’s advice? That’s up to Sue, not God. Will acting on God’s advice conduce toward Sue’s good? That too depends on how Sue responds to the conditions in which she finds herself. God cannot control the choices of other free agents so long as He elects to respect their freedom, and this limit on God’s omnipotence is quite independent of any alleged inadequacies in simple foreknowledge. It seems to me, however, that it is this special feature of Basinger’s case that leads to whatever difficulties it actually presents for divine control. That this is so can be seen by considering providential interventions which lack this element. Alongside Basinger’s test case let us place:

- (8) Sue is a contestant on a game show. God foresees that she will choose Door #3; He therefore manipulates events so that the Grand Prize is placed behind that door.
- (9) Knowing that an unstable general is about to order a full-scale nuclear attack, God channels the acid runoff from a nearby toxic waste dump so that it eats through the telephone cables underneath the Presidential Palace and the general’s order is never received.
- (10) God wishes that the lost Ark of the Covenant not be found again until the Second Coming. Foreseeing that no one will ever look inside a particular cave in the side of a *wadi* not far from Jerusalem, He contrives to have the Ark slip from its litter and tumble into that very cave while a small band of Israelites spirits it away from their enemies under cover of darkness.

- (11) In an early challenge to God's supremacy not recorded in the Bible, Satan foolishly proposes to settle the matter with a game of rock-scissors-paper. Anticipating every choice that Satan will make, God manages not to lose a single round.

Basinger's objections appear to be altogether inappropriate to these cases. I conclude that he has not even come close to showing that his example of Sue and Tom is representative of all cases of providential intervention guided by simple foreknowledge; nor do I think that his analysis works even in this favored case, as I have argued at length.

In closing, I reaffirm the position defended in my original paper. Near the beginning of that paper, in discussing some red herrings that can divert attention from the real problems of prescience and providence, I noted the temptation to engage in fatalistic ways of thinking. Unless I have seriously misread them, the responses of my two critics illustrate how easy it is to succumb to this temptation.

Whittier College

NOTES

1. This mistake in my formulation of (DP) was brought to my attention independently by Carl Ginet.
2. "Providence, Foreknowledge, and Decision Procedures," *Faith and Philosophy* (July 1993), p. 416.
3. *Ibid.*
4. "Divine Providence and Simple Foreknowledge," *Faith and Philosophy* (July 1993), p. 410.
5. "Simple Foreknowledge and Providential Control," *Faith and Philosophy* (July 1993), p. 424.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 425.
7. Claim (2), of course, is the center of an ongoing controversy which, since Nelson Pike's "Divine Foreknowledge and Voluntary Action" (*Philosophical Review* 74 (January 1965), pp. 27-46), has inspired over 100 published articles and enough books to stock a small shelf.
8. *Op. cit.*, p. 426.