

THEOLOGICAL FATALISM AND FRANKFURT COUNTEREXAMPLES TO THE PRINCIPLE OF ALTERNATIVE POSSIBILITIES

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In a recent article, David Hunt has proposed a theological counterexample to the principle of alternative possibilities involving divine foreknowledge (G-scenario). Hunt claims that this example is immune to my criticism of regular Frankfurt-type counterexamples to that principle, as God's foreknowing an agent's act does not causally determine that act. Furthermore, he claims that the considerations which support the claim that the agent is morally responsible for his act in a Frankfurt-type scenario also hold in a G-scenario. In reply, I contest Hunt's symmetry claim and also raise a worry whether, given theological fatalism, the agent's act in a G-scenario can be deemed a free act in the libertarian sense. Finally, I offer an independent argument why in a G-scenario the agent should not be regarded morally blameworthy for his act.

A widely accepted moral intuition has it that

(PAD) An agent is morally responsible for his *decision* (choice, undertaking) to perform an act A only if he could have avoided making it.¹

One well-known type of counterexample to this principle (henceforth 'Frankfurt-type counterexample' or 'F-example' for short) has the following structure. A certain agent, Jones, decides at time T to perform an act A for reasons of his own. Unbeknownst to Jones, however, he would have been caused to decide to do A by some other agent Black, if he (Jones) were to show a sign X that he was not going to decide to do A. If, on the other hand, Jones does *not* show that sign, but a different sign Y that is contradictory to X, then Black does nothing knowing that in this case Jones will decide to do A on his own. (It is assumed that Black knows Jones very well in that regard). Now, since in the actual situation Jones acts on his own without Black's intervention, it seems that he acts freely and is therefore morally responsible for what he does. But, given Black's presence, it would appear that Jones could not have avoided deciding to do A. This being the case, it is maintained that PAD is false.²

In Widerker (1995a, 1995b), I argued that a libertarian should not find the foregoing counterexample convincing. The proponent of the example, I claimed, faces the following dilemma: Either the sign Y, which Black employs as a sign for not intervening, is associated with a deterministic



cause of Jones's decision (at T) to do A (henceforth 'D(A)') or it is not. If it is, then a libertarian should not accept the counterexample, since he holds that a free decision must not be causally determined. On the other hand, if Y is not so associated with D(A), then there is no reason to think that D(A) was unavoidable.

Recently, David Hunt has proposed a theological counterexample to PAD, which he claims is superior to a F-type counterexample.³ Hunt asks us to imagine a situation in which Jones's decision to do A is foreknown or forebelieved by God. Let us call such a scenario a 'G-scenario'. The unavoidability of D(A) in such a scenario, Hunt claims, can then be established on the basis of considerations employed in an influential argument for theological fatalism. According to this argument, if Jones were able to refrain from D(A), there would be a time T1 prior to the occurrence of D(A) and a possible future F relative to T1 in which D(A) does not occur. But if divine foreknowledge exists, then the past relative to T1 contains God's infallible belief that D(A) will occur. And this entails that *every* possible future relative to T1 contains D(A). Consequently, D(A) is unavoidable for Jones at T1.⁴

In my earlier work on Frankfurt's argument against PAD, I did not consider G-type scenarios, since the context within which Frankfurt placed his argument was a non-theological one. Hunt's paper gives me the opportunity to defend the plausibility of PAD in a theological setting as well.

Why does Hunt think that a G-type scenario provides a counterexample to PAD? Hunt offers two reasons.

- (a) In a G-scenario the unavoidability of D(A) is not guaranteed by a causal mechanism. It rests, rather, on the actual operation of a cognitive mechanism - God's prior belief that D(A) will occur - that does not cause or compel what that mechanism cognizes. That being the case, the agent can be said to act on his own, and the example is not subject to my earlier criticism of an F-type counterexample.
- (b) The same considerations which support the claim that Jones is morally responsible for D(A) in a F-scenario also obtain in a G-scenario. In a F-scenario, the factor that prevents Jones from acting otherwise does not play any role in leading Jones to act as he did. Indeed, everything happens there just as it would have happened without Black's presence in the situation, or without his readiness to intrude into it. For this reason, the presence of the counterfactual intervener is irrelevant to accounting for Jones's action. And, therefore, he should be deemed blameworthy for D(A). Hunt claims that all this remains true when we move from a F-scenario to a G-scenario.⁵

Hunt's line of argument is tempting. If correct, it would weaken the plausibility of PAD. In addition, it would also weaken the force of the influential argument for theological fatalism, on which it relies, showing that even if an agent's act is unavoidable, the agent may still be held morally responsible for it. I believe, however, that Hunt's attack on PAD does not succeed.

In what follows, I first explain why I think it is problematic. I then develop an independent argument showing that an agent in a G-scenario should not be deemed morally blameworthy for his decision.

I

To refute PAD, Hunt must provide a scenario in which Jones acts on his own and yet his decision to do A is unavoidable. It is far from clear that a G-scenario meets this requirement. Note that, since God (as traditionally conceived) is essentially infallible,⁶ the occurrence of D(A) at T is entailed (in the broadly logical sense) by God's prior belief that D(A) will occur at T. In this sense, D(A) can be said to be *metaphysically necessitated* or metaphysically determined by that belief of God. Now, if a libertarian rejects as an instance of an agent's acting on his own a scenario in which D(A) is *nomically necessitated* by a temporally prior fact, why wouldn't he reject one in which D(A) is metaphysically necessitated by such a fact?⁷ What, in my opinion, is crucial to the libertarian's conception of a free decision is that such a decision is not necessitated in any way by an antecedent fact.⁸ This condition is not satisfied in a G-scenario. Now, Hunt may object that metaphysical necessitation is not *nomical* necessitation. But note first that nomic necessitation is not the only kind of necessitation relation.⁹ Secondly, and more importantly, metaphysical necessitation when defined as entailment between two facts, where the first fact is distinct from, and temporally prior to, the second one, seems to me a perfectly legitimate instance of a necessitating relation; one that, by my lights, is incompatible with libertarian freedom. If Hunt thinks otherwise, it is incumbent upon him to explain why this is so.

Hunt's attempt to refute PAD becomes more problematic when we turn to his second reason for thinking that a G-scenario provides a suitable counterexample to PAD, i.e., that the same considerations which support the intuition that Jones is morally responsible for D(A) in a F-scenario also apply to a G-scenario. As one may recall, central to Frankfurt's account of why in a F-scenario Jones is morally responsible for what he did, despite the fact that he could not have done otherwise, is the contention that

- (1) Jones would have decided in the same way and for the same reasons even if the factor that made it impossible for him to decide otherwise were absent.

(1) is supposed to capture the idea that (a) the fact that Jones could not have done otherwise in a F-scenario is irrelevant to the explanation of why Jones acted as he did, and therefore should not be assigned any weight in the assessment of Jones's responsibility for that act.¹⁰ In addition, according to Frankfurt, (1) is also supposed to show that (b) the lack of an alternative course of action in a F-scenario could not count as an *excuse* for what Jones did.¹¹ Notice, however, that (1) though true in a F-scenario, does not hold in a G-scenario. In that scenario the preventing factor is God's belief that Jones will decide to do A. Now, if that factor were absent, that is, if God were not to hold that belief, then, given God's essential omniscience, it follows that Jones would *not* decide to do A, which is contrary to what is

maintained in (1).

Similar remarks apply to a related claim employed by Frankfurt for establishing (a) and (b), which is that Jones would have acted in the same way and for the same reasons even if he could have done otherwise.¹² Or putting this point in a slightly different way,

- (2) In a counterfactual situation in which Jones *could* have decided otherwise, he still would have acted in the same way and for the same reasons.

Again, this claim turns out to be false in a G-scenario, since in view of the alleged incompatibility between divine foreknowledge and Jones's freedom to act otherwise, a situation of the sort described in (2) simply does not exist.¹³

The upshot of all this is that there is an important asymmetry (of the relevant kind) between a F-scenario and a G-scenario. The reasons for rejecting PAD which seem cogent in a F-scenario do not apply to a G-scenario.¹⁴

II

Can a proponent of PAD go further? Can he, in addition to showing that Hunt's attack on PAD is fallacious, also offer an independent argument why in a G-scenario Jones should *not* be held morally responsible for D(A)? I believe the answer to this question is positive, at least in the case where D(A) is a morally wrong action and "morally responsible" is understood as "morally blameworthy." To see this, consider the following libertarian reply to the charge that Jones is morally blameworthy for D(A) in a G-scenario.

Granted, for the sake of discussion, that in a G-scenario Jones acted on his own. Still, since you, Hunt, are holding him blameworthy for his decision to do A, tell me *what should he have done in the situation in question, so as to be able to escape moral blame?* Now, you cannot claim that he should not have decided to do A, since this is something that was not in Jones's power to do. Hence, I do not see how you can hold him blameworthy for his decision to break the promise.

Call this defense the "What-should-he-have-done? defense" or for short the "W-defense."

The W-defense points to an important reason why it is implausible to think that agents in a G-type scenario are morally blameworthy for what they did. When we claim that someone is morally blameworthy for a certain act, we believe that morally speaking, he should have behaved differently or should not have acted as he did. This belief is essential to our moral disapproval of the way he behaved.¹⁵ Sometimes, however, such a belief might be unreasonable. This might happen in a situation in which it is clear to us that the agent could not have avoided acting as he did. To expect in this situation that the agent should have acted differently is to expect him to have done the impossible. By implication, believing him to be blameworthy because he has not fulfilled this unreasonable expectation would be unreasonable.¹⁶

The above consideration leads to the following intuitive argument in

favor of PAD as applied to moral blame, i.e.,

(PADB) An agent is morally blameworthy for his *decision* (choice, undertaking) to do A only if he could have avoided making it.

1. An agent S is morally blameworthy for doing A only if in the circumstances in which he acted it would be morally reasonable¹⁷ to expect that S should not have done A.
2. If S could not have avoided doing A, then on pain of expecting him to have done the impossible, it would be morally unreasonable to expect him not to have done A.
3. Hence, if S could not have avoided doing A, then S is not morally blameworthy for doing A. (Q.E.D)¹⁸

III

Hunt has presented an articulate and ingenious argument in which he enlists a theological scenario to refute PAD. We have seen, however, that the assumptions it involves are problematic. Moreover, we have also seen that a strong case can be made for PAD where it applies to moral blame. All this lends further support to the claim that, *pace* Frankfurt et. alia, PAD expresses an adequate necessary condition for moral responsibility.¹⁹

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NOTES

1. The term 'morally responsible' as used in PAD is not intended to cover cases of derivative responsibility, i.e., cases where the agent is said to be responsible for an act by virtue of being responsible for the causal conditions that led to it. Obviously, PAD would be false, if it were meant to apply to such cases as well.

2. See Frankfurt 1969, 836.

3. See Hunt 1996. For precursors of this example, see Fischer 1986, 55, and Zagzebski 1991, chap.6.

4. Here I follow Hunt's presentation of the argument for theological fatalism. Another way of stating the argument is the following:

D(A) is unavoidable for Jones at any given time T earlier than D(A), because the fact that D(A) will occur is logically entailed by some other fact that relative to T is unavoidable for him, namely, the fact that God believed in the past that D(A) would occur.

5. Hunt *op. cit.*, 399-400.

6. By saying that God is essentially infallible, I mean that it is impossible for God to believe a false proposition. Also, God is conceived to be essentially all-knowing or omniscient in the sense that God cannot fail to believe any true proposition.

7. A fact E is nomically necessitated by a temporally prior fact F just in case E is entailed by the conjunction of F and some laws of nature, and is not entailed by either conjunct alone.

8. For a constraint on libertarian freedom along precisely these lines,

see Alston 1989, 164-165.

9. See Kim 1974.

10. See Frankfurt 1969, 837.

11. *Ibid*, 837. Something counts as an excuse only if its absence would make a difference to the way the agent behaved, i.e., only if were it not to obtain, the agent would have acted differently. This, we know, is not true of Jones in a F-scenario.

12. *Ibid*, 837.

13. Here I am relying on the assumption that God is a necessary being, an assumption that is accepted by traditional theism.

14. I say "seem cogent", since ultimately I hold that even in a F-scenario these considerations do not show that the agent is morally responsible for what he did. I defend this claim in Widerker 1998.

15. See Wallace 1994, chapter 4.

16. In Widerker 1998, I argue that the same defense can be applied against the attempt to hold an agent blameworthy in a regular Frankfurt-type scenario.

17. By "morally reasonable" I mean reasonable for someone who is aware of all the relevant moral facts pertaining to S's doing A.

18. For a related, but still different argument for PAD, see Copp 1997 and Widerker 1991.

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