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FRANKFURT COUNTEREXAMPLES: SOME COMMENTS ON THE WIDERKER-FISCHER DEBATE

David P. Hunt

One strategy in recent discussions of theological fatalism is to draw on Harry Frankfurt's famous counterexamples to the principle of alternate possibilities (PAP) to defend human freedom from divine foreknowledge. For those who endorse this line, "Frankfurt counterexamples" are supposed to *show* that PAP is false, and this conclusion is then extended to the foreknowledge case. This makes it critical to determine whether Frankfurt counterexamples perform as advertised, an issue recently debated in this journal *via* a pair of articles by David Widerker and John Martin Fischer. I suggest that this debate can be avoided: divine foreknowledge is itself a paradigmatic counterexample to PAP, requiring no support from suspect Frankfurt counterexamples.

A famous argument by Harry Frankfurt, challenging a widespread assumption about moral responsibility, rests on a special type of counterexample.¹ Following Peter van Inwagen, let us call instances of this type "Frankfurt counterexamples."² A typical Frankfurt counterexample goes like this. Jones murders Smith, and does so under conditions which are as favorable as possible to Jones's freedom and responsibility, given the following peculiarity. There is a third party, Black, who wishes Jones to murder Smith, and who possesses a mechanism capable of monitoring and controlling a person's thoughts. Thinking that Jones might well do what he wishes him to do anyway, but unwilling to be disappointed in this expectation, Black programs the mechanism to monitor Jones's thoughts for evidence of his intentions with respect to murdering Smith, and to manipulate those thoughts to ensure the murder of Smith should it appear that Jones is not going to acquire the requisite intention in any other way. As it happens, the mechanism does not have to intervene in the course of events, because Jones goes ahead and murders Smith on his own.

Frankfurt thought that two judgments are pretty obviously warranted in such a case. First, Jones is morally responsible for killing Smith: the other aspects of the situation were posited to be ideal for moral responsibility, while the mechanism did not end up contributing in any way to Jones's decision to kill Smith (which would have occurred just as it did even if the mechanism had not existed). Second, Jones was unable to



refrain from killing Smith: given the mechanism, no alternative course of action was available to Jones, though he was completely unaware of this fact. The case therefore seemed to Frankfurt to constitute a decisive counterexample to the “principle of alternate possibilities” (or “PAP”), which Frankfurt formulated as follows: “a person is morally responsible for what he has done only if he could have done otherwise.”³ Similar principles, couched in terms of free will rather than moral responsibility, appear equally susceptible to Frankfurt counterexamples, and have for this reason been linked to PAP in the subsequent literature.

Of the various philosophical puzzles which turn on the availability of alternate possibilities, one that is presumably of special interest to readers of this journal is the problem of “theological fatalism.” This problem lies in the fact that a powerful argument can be formulated for the conclusion that divine foreknowledge is incompatible with libertarian freedom.⁴ What divine foreknowledge directly excludes, according to the argument, is the existence of alternate possibilities: if alternate possibilities exist, there is some time *T* and some action *A* (consisting of a particular person tokening a particular action-type at a particular time) which are such that, while the actual future relative to *T* contains *A*, a possible future relative to *T* contains $\sim A$; but if divine foreknowledge exists, the past relative to *T* (no matter how early *T* might be) contains an infallible belief in *A*, and this entails that *no* possible future relative to *T* contains $\sim A$. With alternate possibilities excluded by divine foreknowledge, what completes the connection with libertarian freedom is clearly something like PAP—e.g., “a person is (libertarianly) free in what he has done only if he could have done otherwise.”⁵

The idea that rejecting PAP might be a viable move in confronting theological fatalism was curiously long in coming, and has only recently secured a place in the ongoing discussion.⁶ It is not surprising, then, that debate over the implications for PAP of “Frankfurt-style” counterexamples has now reached the pages of this journal, in the form of a pair of articles by David Widerker and John Martin Fischer.⁷ Widerker offers reasons for doubting that Frankfurt counterexamples refute PAP, while Fischer defends the efficacy of the counterexamples. It is true that the connection with theological fatalism is not brought out (or even mentioned) in either of these two articles; but there can be little doubt that this is the subtext of the dispute between Widerker and Fischer. Both have written extensively on the problem of divine foreknowledge *v.* human freedom,⁸ and both have addressed the relationship between this problem and Frankfurt’s argument against PAP.⁹ Moreover, both have offered astute (and, to my mind, devastating) critiques of the most popular strategy for avoiding the problem, namely, “Ockhamism”. This strategy, first adumbrated by William Ockham, distinguishes “soft” from “hard” facts about the past and numbers God’s past beliefs about future contingencies among the former. The upshot is that the future is not “fixed” by God’s past beliefs about it since those beliefs (being “soft”) are not themselves “fixed” until the foreknown events transpire: God’s foreknowledge regarding *A* will turn out to have been a belief that *A* if *A* ensues and a belief that $\sim A$ if *A* does not ensue. On this view

divine foreknowledge is perfectly compatible with alternate possibilities, and so gives rise to no PAP-based threat to human freedom. Since Widerker and Fischer both reject this strategy, and accept as a consequence of rejecting it that alternate possibilities are indeed excluded by divine foreknowledge, the only alternative (short of rejecting divine foreknowledge, on the one hand, or human freedom, on the other) is a re-examination of PAP. Because they have ruled out other exits from the dilemma, and because Frankfurt counterexamples seem to pose the strongest challenge to PAP, it is natural for Widerker and Fischer to regard a verdict on these counterexamples as integral to the assessment of Pike's argument for theological fatalism. It is this implicit agreement between Widerker and Fischer, rather than their explicit disagreement over the verdict, that I wish to examine in the brief remarks that follow.

Suppose a mechanism M is such that, were M active, it would render A unavoidable. Consider two mechanisms of this sort: M_1 is a mechanism which, when active, produces *coercive conditions* sufficient for A to occur, while M_2 is a mechanism which, when active, produces an *infallible belief* that A will occur. Consider further two scenarios in which such mechanisms would bring about A 's unavoidability. The first is where the mechanism *is* active. Call this an "actual intervention scenario." The second is where the following are true:

- (a) A will occur.
- (b) If (and only if) it is the case that, were the mechanism inactive, A would not occur, then the mechanism is active.
- (c) It is not the case that, were the mechanism inactive, A would not occur.

Call this a "counterfactual intervention scenario." The two scenarios together with the two mechanisms yield four possible combinations, in all of which A is unavoidable. Now a Frankfurt counterexample always involves an M_1 mechanism placed in a *counterfactual intervention scenario* (call this combination a "counterfactual M_1 scenario"). Among the possible mechanisms mentioned by Frankfurt are a threat so terrible that it is psychologically irresistible; an inner compulsion generated by a potion or hypnotic state; and a direct manipulation of the brain and nervous system.¹⁰ But in Frankfurt counterexamples no intervention in fact takes place; unavoidability rests instead on the fact that, *were* certain conditions to obtain (and they don't), an intervention *would* occur (though it doesn't). Divine foreknowledge, on the other hand, involves an M_2 mechanism operating in an *actual intervention scenario* (call this combination an "actual M_2 scenario"). Here unavoidability rests on the actual operation of a cognitive mechanism that does not cause, compel, or in any way bring about what it cognizes.¹¹ The great difference between the two cases—a counterfactual M_1 scenario *v.* an actual M_2 scenario—raises a *prima facie* question whether the judgment we make about Frankfurt counterexamples is really transferrable to divine foreknowledge, as Widerker and Fischer implicitly assume.

(1) Suppose first of all that PAP survives the Frankfurt counterexamples, as Widerker alleges. How much does its success in this case enhance its prospects for success in the foreknowledge case? Not much,

since the difficulties Widerker raises for Frankfurt counterexamples (and which Fischer tries to circumvent) appear to arise precisely from those features of the counterexamples in virtue of which they instance a counterfactual M_1 scenario.

The following difficulty is typical. How is it that the counterfactual intervener can step in when (and only when) Jones would otherwise desist from murder? There must be some feature of the actual situation (in which no intervention takes place) which guarantees that Jones will murder Smith; there must also be some feature of the counterfactual situation (in which intervention does occur) which guarantees that Jones, without this intervention, will *not* murder Smith. But then it appears that a counterfactual M_1 scenario can make the murder of Smith unavoidable for Jones only if the murder is causally determined (for how could the guarantee be completely reliable without causally necessitating what it guarantees?). If this is so, then the libertarian will deny that this is after all a case in which Jones is *morally responsible* for his unavoidable deed, and the example will fail to provide a decisive refutation of PAP. This problem can be evaded by shifting to an actual intervention scenario, where intervention does not wait upon a causal guarantee. But this only exchanges one problem for another, since an M_1 mechanism that is actually intervening (rather than waiting on the sidelines) makes the murder unavoidable by causally necessitating it, again jeopardizing Jones's moral responsibility. Either way, Frankfurt's attack on PAP falls short.

It is not necessary to decide the cogency of this line here. What is important is that this defense of PAP is possible only because Frankfurt counterexamples involve an M_1 mechanism operating in a *counterfactual* intervention scenario. A counterexample to PAP must (i) preclude alternate possibilities while (ii) preserving moral responsibility. Actual interventions by an M_1 mechanism are coercive and consequently fail requirement (ii), while merely counterfactual interventions, though not themselves (actually) coercive, satisfy requirement (i) only if the conditions triggering or forestalling intervention are embedded in a deterministic environment inimical to (ii). Because it is precisely the counterfactual M_1 character of the Frankfurt counterexamples that Widerker exploits in turning aside their attack on PAP, there is no reason to think that the same defense can be offered against divine foreknowledge cases, which are neither M_1 nor counterfactual.

(2) Suppose instead that PAP fails in face of the Frankfurt counterexamples, as Fischer (following Frankfurt) argues. How much does its failure in this case increase its likelihood of failure in the other case? It might be thought that the question is irrelevant: if PAP is refuted by Frankfurt counterexamples, it can't be appealed to in an argument for theological fatalism, and that's the end of that. True; but this is just a temporary solution which will work only long enough for the theological fatalist to shift to a restricted version of PAP which no longer purports to cover counterfactual M_1 scenarios. So we are brought back to the question, How much does PAP's failure in a counterfactual M_1 scenario increase its likelihood of failure in an actual M_2 scenario?

Again, not much, and this for two reasons. First, PAP is strongly intuitive; as Frankfurt himself noted, “[i]t has generally seemed so overwhelmingly plausible that some philosophers have even characterized it as an *a priori* truth.”¹² The idea that the future is (at least on occasion) “open,” a field for alternate possibilities, is not only entrenched in our moral thinking, but also in our thinking about time: without it, an important asymmetry between past and future would be lost. So even if PAP can be shown to fail in Frankfurt cases, there may be considerable intuitive pressure to isolate its failure to just those cases in which it can be shown to fail while continuing to assume its validity in other cases (at least absent some independent reason for thinking that it fails in these cases as well).

Second, the failure of PAP in the face of Frankfurt counterexamples does nothing to enhance its prospects for failure in divine foreknowledge cases because the latter do not need support from the former—and could not acquire it from that source in any case. This is because PAP’s failure is considerably more obvious in the case of divine foreknowledge than it is in a counterfactual M_1 scenario. Recall what it is about Frankfurt’s counterexample that is supposed to leave Jones morally responsible for Smith’s murder despite its inevitability. Frankfurt himself characterized its exculpatory features this way: the mechanism “played no role at all in leading [Jones] to act as he did;” indeed, “everything happened just as it would have happened without Black’s presence in the situation and without his readiness to intrude into it;” for this reason the counterfactual intervener is “irrelevant to the problem of accounting for a person’s action” and “does not help in any way to understand either what made [Jones] act as he did or what, in other circumstances, he might have done.”¹³ But if this is true of the Frankfurt counterexamples, it is all the more true of divine foreknowledge cases. God’s infallible beliefs about the future rule out alternate possibilities without their making any difference to, or playing any role in, or helping in any way to explain the future. If these grounds for rejecting PAP are cogent in the case of Frankfurt counterexamples, they should be equally cogent in the case of divine foreknowledge. Indeed, they should be *more* cogent, since foreknowledge cases are immune to the difficulties Widerker raises for Frankfurt counterexamples.

In sum, the strategy one finds employed when Frankfurt’s argument is brought to bear on the problem of theological fatalism is the following. First, we are supposed to see that PAP is false by considering one of the Frankfurt counterexamples; second, we are supposed to reject theological fatalism because we have seen that PAP is false. Both of these moves are vulnerable. First, the way in which Frankfurt counterexamples falsify PAP (if indeed they succeed in doing this at all) is considerably less straightforward than one would have supposed from Frankfurt’s original article. (I think that Widerker has shown this much, even if Fischer’s reply on behalf of Frankfurt is successful.) Second, the rejection of PAP on the basis of a Frankfurt counterexample is insufficient to rebut theological fatalism, since (as we have seen) an actual M_2 scenario is very different from a counterfactual M_1 scenario. There is a

serious question, then, whether this strategy can really be prosecuted successfully.

A better strategy is to draw one's counterexample from divine foreknowledge itself. God knew 100 years ago that I would write this paper. It was therefore inevitable that I write it. But God's foreknowledge did not cause or compel me to write the paper; I did not write it *because* God foreknew that I would write it. To whatever extent it is clear in the Frankfurt counterexamples that an action can be unavoidable without this jeopardizing its libertarian freedom, it is at least as clear (if not more so) in divine foreknowledge cases that the foreknown action can be unavoidable yet libertarianly free. The same intuitions that support Frankfurt's argument, when brought to bear on divine foreknowledge of human actions, provide direct support for the claim that these actions can be libertarianly free despite their inevitability. There is no need to seek indirect support for this judgment *via* a consideration of Frankfurt counterexamples—indeed, doing so can only muddy the waters by making freedom in the face of divine foreknowledge appear on a par with, and to require support from, freedom in the face of counterfactual intervention.¹⁴ If one agrees (as I do) with Widerker and Fischer that divine foreknowledge does indeed entail inevitability, then divine foreknowledge constitutes a pure counterexample to PAP which does not rely on complicated mechanisms or triggering conditions and suffers none of the defects that Widerker attributes to Frankfurt counterexamples.

This seems to me to be the direction one ought to go in solving the problem of theological fatalism, and it is a solution that does not depend on the resolution of the debate between Widerker and Fischer. This debate is certainly important inasmuch as it deepens our understanding of the ways in which human freedom and responsibility do or do not require avoid-ability. But the outcome of this debate is not crucial to the question whether human freedom survives the unavoidability entailed by divine foreknowledge.¹⁵

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NOTES

1. Harry Frankfurt, "Alternate Possibilities and Moral Responsibility," *Journal of Philosophy* 66 (December 1969), pp. 829-39.

2. Peter van Inwagen, "Ability and Responsibility," *Philosophical Review* 87 (April 1978), pp. 201-24.

3. *Op. cit.*, p. 829.

4. The *Ur*-argument for the contemporary debate over theological fatalism is Nelson Pike's "Divine Omniscience and Voluntary Action," *Philosophical Review* 74 (January 1965), pp. 27-46.

5. For the role of libertarian freedom in Pikean arguments for theological fatalism, see William P. Alston, "Divine Foreknowledge and Alternative Conceptions of Human Freedom," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 18 (1985), pp. 19-32.

6. See, e.g., Eleonore Stump, "Intellect, Will, and the Principle of

Alternate Possibilities," in Michael Beaty, ed., *Christian Theism and the Problems of Philosophy* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1990), pp. 254-85; Linda Trinkaus Zagzebski, *The Dilemma of Freedom and Foreknowledge* (New York: Oxford U. Press, 1991); John Martin Fischer, *The Metaphysics of Freedom*, Aristotelian Society Series, v. 14 (Oxford, UK, & Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1994); and my "On Augustine's Way Out," *Medieval Philosophy and Theology* 5 (1996), pp. 1-30.

7. David Widerker, "Libertarian Freedom and the Avoidability of Decisions," and John Martin Fischer, "Libertarianism and Avoidability," both in *Faith and Philosophy* 12 (January 1995).

8. E.g., Fischer, "Freedom and Foreknowledge," *Philosophical Review* 92 (January 1983), pp. 67-79, and Widerker, "Troubles with Ockhamism," *Journal of Philosophy* (1990), pp. 462-80, to cite just one article each from their extensive writings on theological fatalism.

9. Widerker does this in "Providence, Eternity, and Human Freedom," *Faith and Philosophy* 11 (April 1994), pp. 242-54, while Fischer discusses the relationship in *The Metaphysics of Freedom*, *op. cit.*

10. *Op. cit.*, pp. 835-6.

11. At least divine foreknowledge is traditionally understood as actual or "occurrent" in nature. For an alternative conception, see my "Dispositional Omniscience," *Philosophical Studies* 80 (December 1995), pp. 243-278. I show how far this conception can go in solving the problem of theological fatalism in my "Does Theological Fatalism Rest on an Equivocation?" *American Philosophical Quarterly* 32 (April 1995), pp. 153-65.

12. *Op. cit.*, p. 829.

13. *Ibid.*, pp. 836-7.

14. I am speaking here primarily of the *logical* situation. I do not mean to deny that Frankfurt counterexamples might enjoy a *psychological* advantage over foreknowledge examples for a particular person insofar as the former are easier for that person to imagine or accept than the latter; nor do I mean to deny that Frankfurt counterexamples might make a genuine *rhetorical* contribution to the debate insofar as they serve to mitigate the feeling we might otherwise have (were the rejection of PAP based on the foreknowledge case alone) that we are engaging in special pleading, making an ad hoc exception to PAP in the divine case just so we can secure a favorable outcome to the foreknowledge problem. The crucial point, however, is that since all the features of the Frankfurt cases that challenge our commitment to PAP are also present in the foreknowledge case, it is irrational to accept the former but not the latter (however psychologically understandable it might be).

15. I want to thank Bill Wainwright and Linda Zagzebski for valuable suggestions which led to improvements in the paper.