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Divine omniscience, timelessness, and the power to do otherwise

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Abstract: **There is a familiar argument based on the principle that the past is fixed that, if God foreknows what I will do, I do not have the power to act otherwise. So, there is a problem about reconciling divine omniscience with the power to do otherwise. However the problem posed by the argument does not provide a good reason for adopting the view that God is outside time. In particular, arguments for the fixity of the past, if successful, either establish His timelessness independently of the problem, or mean that the problem could not be solved by adopting the view that He is timeless.**

The incompatibility argument

There is a familiar argument that, if God foreknows what I will do, I do not have the power to act otherwise. Let us call it 'the incompatibility argument'. If one is convinced by the argument, and wishes to maintain both that we do often have the power to act otherwise than we do, and that God is omniscient, it may seem attractive to take the view that God is outside time, and that His knowledge of our actions is, therefore, not *fore*knowledge. I want to question this motivation for the view that God is timeless.

There are various ways of spelling out the incompatibility argument, but here is a plausible way of doing so, which is essentially due to Pike.[1]

It is assumed for the purposes of the argument that God is essentially omniscient, and that omniscience consists in believing all and only true propositions. The argument then proceeds in the following way:

> Suppose that John does X at t_2. Then at t_1 God believed that John would do X at t_2 – if God is in time.[2]
> Suppose then that John has the power to refrain from doing X at t_2. It follows that one of the following is true:
>
> (1) John has the power so to act at t_2 that God would have held a false belief at t_1.

(2) John has the power so to act at t_2 that God would not have existed at t_1.
(3) John has the power so to act at t_2 that God would have held a different belief from the one He actually held at t_1; i.e. God would have believed at t_1 that John would not do X at t_2.

However (1) must be false, given God's essential omniscience. (2) also seems clearly false. And finally, (3) seems to be false on account of the fixity of the past – one cannot now, or in the future, make a difference to the past; or, more generally, one cannot at any time act in such a way as to make a difference to what is then past. More precisely, we might express the principle of the fixity of the past thus:

FP No agent can so act at t that some hard fact about some earlier time would not have been a fact.[3]

Why the presence of 'hard', and what is a hard fact? Roughly speaking, a hard fact about a time (or period of time) is a fact which is not partly about some other time. And the reason for the presence of 'hard' is that without it the principle would not be plausible. For suppose that Mary believed truly yesterday that John would do the washing-up today. Then that is a fact about the past, but there is no difficulty in supposing that John has the power so to act that it was not a fact (though a fatalist might deny this). But it is reasonable to say that the fact that Mary believed truly that John would do the washing-up today is partly about today on the grounds that it logically (analytically) entails that something will occur today. Again, suppose that Mary was engaged in reading *War and Peace* from cover to cover yesterday; and suppose that she is still engaged in it today. Then it was a fact about the past that she was yesterday engaged in reading *War and Peace* from cover to cover, but that does not mean that she does not have the power today so to act that it would not have been a fact. She has the power to stop reading it for good. But it is reasonable to claim that the proposition that she was engaged in reading *War and Peace* from cover to cover yesterday was partly about today on the following grounds: although it does not entail that anything happens today, its truth is in fact constituted in part by what happens today.[4]

Of course, the argument depends on the plausibility of the claim that the fact that at t_1 God believed that John would do X at t_2 would be a hard fact about t_1. Is it plausible?

It seemed reasonable to claim that the fact that Mary was reading *War and Peace* from cover to cover yesterday was partly about today on the grounds that this fact was partly constituted by what happened today. Would it be equally reasonable to claim that the fact that at t_1 God believed that John would do X at t_2 was partly constituted by what happened after t_1, and, in particular, by what happened at t_2? Surely not.

Again, it seemed reasonable to claim that the fact that yesterday Mary believed truly that John would do the washing-up today is partly about today on the grounds that it analytically entails that something will occur today. Now, it is true that the incompatibility argument is assuming that God is essentially omniscient. And, given the understanding of omniscience employed, this will mean that it is a necessary truth that, if God believed at t_1 that John would do X at t_2, then John *would* do X at t_2. But that is not to say that it is an analytic truth that this is so, for, although 'God' might be used in such a way that it was part of the meaning of the word that God is omniscient, there is no reason why it should not instead be used as a mere proper name. But, since it would be a bit surprising if the plausibility of the argument depended on the fact that 'God' was being used as a mere proper name, it is worth asking if the argument would fail if 'God' were being used in such a way that it was an analytic truth that if God believed at t_1 that John would do X at t_2, then John would do X at t_2; that is to say, if 'God' were being used in such a way that the fact that God believed at t_1 that John would do *X* at t_2 was, for that reason, *not* a hard fact about t_1.

The answer is that the argument would not fail. It would indeed be true that the fact that God had this belief was partly about t_2; but this would not be enough to make it reasonable to claim that John had the power so to act that it was not true that God had this belief at t_1. For consider why it is possible for John so to act today that Mary did not believe truly that he would do the washing-up today. It is indeed crucial that the fact that Mary had this true belief analytically entails that John would do the washing-up today. This means that whether Mary *counts* as having had a true belief on the subject yesterday depends on what John does today. And this in turn means that John has the power not to do the washing-up, because he has the power to do something which would mean that Mary did not count as having a true belief, but only because *there is no impossibility in Mary's having a false belief*. But with God it is different.

Suppose it is an analytic truth that, if God believed at t_1 that John would do X at t_2, then John would do X at t_2; then whether the person who believed at t_1 that John would do X at t_2 counts as being God depends logically on what John does at t_2. But that does not mean that John has the power not to do X; he cannot so act that this person had a false belief because there *is* an impossibility in His having a false belief, since He is *essentially* omniscient – or so it is being assumed. So it is not just that the following sentence could not be true: 'God has a false belief'. That would not be enough to make it impossible for God to have a false belief, if it were possible for God not to be God. The fact that God is essentially omniscient means that *He* could not have a false belief. So, even if the argument used 'God' is such a way that it was an analytic truth that God has no false beliefs, that would not impair the argument. In short, it is one thing to claim that no agent can so act at *t* that some hard fact about some earlier

time would not have been a fact; it is quite another to claim, given any non-hard fact about some earlier time, that some agent *can* so act that that fact would not have been a fact.

Let us accept, then, that allowing the incompatibility argument to use 'God' as a proper name does not allow it some sort of illicit plausibility. In that case we may grant that it is plausible to treat the fact that at t_1 God believed that John would do X at t_2 as a hard fact about t_1.

The primary thesis

So much for the argument. Now I do not claim that the initial assumptions on which the argument depends are all true – in particular I think it questionable whether God's knowledge consists in His having beliefs. Nor do I claim that, granted those assumptions, the argument is sound: in fact I do not believe that it is – at least in part because I do not subscribe to the principle of the fixity of the past. My aim is rather to question whether acceptance of the incompatibility argument provides a good reason for adopting the view that God is timeless.

To avoid any possible misunderstanding, let me make it clear that I am *not* arguing that God is not timeless, and I am *not* arguing that there is no good reason to suppose that He is.

As a preliminary let us note that, just as the argument talks about hard facts about times or periods of time, so we may talk about hard timeless facts. (Roughly speaking a hard timeless fact will be a fact which is not partly about some time.) And, just as the incompatibility argument is based on the assumption that the fact that at t_1 God believed that John would do X at t_2 would be a hard fact about t_1, so we may assume that the fact that God timelessly believes that John does X at t_2 would be a hard timeless fact. So evidently, if the incompatibility argument is to provide a good reason for adopting a timeless view of God, the reasons for accepting it had better not mean that there are equally good reasons for believing in the fixity of timeless facts:

> FT No agent can so act at t that some hard timeless fact would not have been a fact.

The main part of my strategy will be to examine *arguments* for the fixity of the past, to which the incompatibility argument appeals. In the case of each of these arguments I shall argue that either it fails, or its success would mean that the incompatibility argument does not provide a reason for adopting a timeless view of God, for one of three reasons: (1) because the argument would show that God cannot be timeless; or (2) because there would be an equally good argument for the fixity of timeless facts – or at least of relevant timeless facts about God's beliefs; or (3) because the argument would establish the timelessness of God without any appeal to the incompatibility argument. This is my primary thesis.

I shall then consider the position of one who accepts that the past is fixed on the basis of simple intuition.

A bad argument

For the sake of the record let us first notice a bad, if tempting, argument. The argument goes like this. If something has already happened, there is nothing you can now do to prevent it; for, if you did, that would mean that it hadn't happened, in spite of the fact that it in fact has; that is to say, it would both have happened and not have happened. And that is impossible. But, of course, the fact that it cannot be the case both that it happened and that it did not happen, merely shows that you will not in fact prevent it. It does not show that you do not have the power to prevent it, but merely that you will not exercise the power. For all the argument shows, if you *had* been going to exercise the power, whatever it was would not have happened. Of course this *may* be impossible; the past *may* fixed. But the argument does not establish this.

The fact is that this argument for the fixity of the past is no better than an argument for the fixity of the future – an argument for fatalism. The argument goes like this. If something is going to happen, there is nothing you can now do to prevent it; for, if you did, that would mean that it was both going to happen and not going to happen. The obvious riposte is that, if it is going to happen, that does not mean that you do not have the power to prevent it, but merely that you are not going to exercise the power. For all the argument shows, if you had been going to exercise the power, whatever it was would not have been going to happen.

I have claimed that this argument for the fixity of the past does not succeed. What if it does, though? Then a parallel argument will establish the fixity of relevant timeless facts. It goes like this. Suppose that God timelessly believes that John cuts the grass at t_2. Then John does not have the power to prevent His believing this. For if John were to prevent it, that would mean that God both does and does not believe it. But that is impossible. So, if God does believe it, John does not have the power so to act that He does not believe it.

So either this argument for the fixity of the past fails or, if it succeeds, there is an equally good argument for the fixity of relevant timeless facts. And this accords with my primary thesis.

An A-theory of time

The second argument I want to consider is based on the acceptance of an A-theory of time as opposed to a B-theory. On a B-theory an event's being past, present, or future is simply a relational matter; it is simply a matter of its occurring at a time which is earlier than, or simultaneous with, or later than some

time which is taken as the reference point. Typically the reference point will be *now*. But there is not some absolute fact about a time which makes it true that it is now. What makes it true that I am writing now is simply the fact that I am writing at the same time as having this thought (let us say). On the A-theory, on the other hand, that this time is now is an absolute (if temporary) fact about it. (Or, perhaps, that this *event* is now is an absolute fact about *it*.)

So far this has no particular implications for the fixity of the past. However, typically A-theories differ from B-theories by saying, not merely that the present differs from the future by being *now*, but also that the present differs from the future by being *real*. The present is real; the future is not. But what about the past? There are two ways an A-theory can go. It can say that the past like the future is also unreal. So the passage of time consists in the movement from unreality to reality and from reality to unreality. This version of the theory, however, does not seem *in itself* to imply any essential difference between the past and the future in virtue of which the past is fixed and the future is not. Of course, one might suggest that the reason the past is fixed is that, unlike the future, it *was* real but is no longer real. The trouble is, though, that we have not been given any reason to think that *this* fact about the past is crucial. The past *was* real and *will not be* real, and the future *will be* real, and *was not* real. But why should *this* explain why the one is fixed and the other not? This *may* be all there is to it, but we do not seem to have any *argument* for the fixity of the past on this account of time; we are in no better position than someone who adopts a B-theory and says that it is the fact that t_1 is earlier that t_2 which means that it is fixed at t_2, and it is the fact that t_3 is later than t_2 which means that it is not fixed at t_2. I shall consider in a later section the position of someone whose belief in the fixity of the past is not based on an argument.

Alternatively, however, an A-theory can say that the past like the present, and unlike the future, is real. In that case, one might claim that it is precisely the unreality of the future which means that it is not fixed, and that it is the fact that the past and present are real that means that they are fixed. So, for instance, God's believing in the past that John will cut the grass is real; and for that reason John does not have the power now so to act that God did not believe this. By contrast, God's believing in the future that John has cut the grass is not real; so John does have the power now so to act that God will not believe this.

So we have the claim that it is the reality of the past and present which means that they are fixed, and the unreality of the future which means that it is not fixed. Is this claim plausible? It is true that the claim about the present looks a bit strange, because it is natural to think that we do have the power to determine whether the grass gets cut *now*. But the response would be that this is the case only if we allow 'now' to include the immediate future. The point is that we do not at this precise moment have the power to determine whether the grass is getting cut at this precise moment; at most we have the power to

determine whether the grass is cut in the immediate future. But why should a difference in reality mean that there is a difference in fixity?

Now it is not wholly clear what is meant by saying that the future is not *real*. It must mean more than that future *things* do not yet exist, or that future *events* are not at present occurring. The B-theorist can agree to *that*. Of course he will not agree that it is an absolute fact that they do not exist and are not yet occurring. But that disagreement is in itself no more than the disagreement about whether being present is an absolute or relative matter. What more it *might* mean is that there are no *facts* about the future in virtue of which propositions about the future are true; if they are true at all, they are true in virtue of facts about the present (and perhaps the past) together, perhaps, with timeless facts. If that is so, the connection between reality and fixity will, presumably, be something like this: it is the very fact that there is no fact of the matter about whether the grass gets cut in the future that means that it is open to someone to create such a fact; by contrast, if the fact exists that the grass gets cut (or does not get cut), we cannot now create it. What does not exist can be created; what does exist cannot be.

Let me emphasize that I do not claim that this account of time is correct, nor that, if it is correct, it follows that the past is fixed. It is enough for my purpose that it is plausible enough to hold such a view to make it worthwhile to discuss the consequences.

Now there may be difficulties about combining an A-theory of time with the view that God is timeless. And, if this combination is impossible, it will follow immediately that, given this argument for the fixity of the past, the view that God is timeless cannot solve the problem posed by the incompatibility argument, since God could not be timeless. However, supposing that the combination is possible, it seems that the view that God is timeless can still not solve the problem. The reason is simply that, if it is the *reality* of the past which makes it fixed, it would seem that God's believing timelessly that John cuts the grass at some time will also be fixed. For surely His believing this, if He does believe it, must be real. That is, there is an equally good argument for the fixity of timeless facts.[5] So either way the outcome accords with my primary thesis.

It is worth noticing that there is a further problem for the timeless view of God in connexion with this A-theory argument, which relates to its claim about reality. As I have said, it is not wholly clear what is meant by saying that the future is not *real*. Let us suppose, as I suggested above, that what it means is that there are no facts about the future in virtue of which propositions about the future are true; if they are true at all, they are true in virtue of facts about the present (and perhaps the past) together, perhaps, with timeless facts. And let us suppose further that it is that feature of the future which means that the future is not fixed. But, in that case, if John has the power to cut or to refrain from cutting the grass, there is no fact that he will and no fact that he will not. But that means that the proposition that John will cut the grass in the future is not yet true *at all*.

Maybe it is not false, but it is not *true*. For the only alternative way in which it could be true is if it were the consequence of facts about the past and present. But these facts would be fixed, being real. But that would mean that John does not have the power so to act that they would not have obtained. So he would not have to power to refrain from cutting the grass.

In that case, if God is in time, there is a natural response to the incompatibility argument. For, if God is omniscient, He will not yet believe that John will cut the grass, because it is not yet true that he will. That is to say, what the incompatibility argument claimed is not true; it is not true that, if John does X at t_2, God believed at t_1 that he would. So the incompatibility argument fails. But what if God is timeless? In that case He cannot believe that John cuts the grass at t_2 at all. It cannot be the case at t_1 that He believes it, because it is not true at t_1; but, if He is timeless, that means simply that He does not believe it. If He is timeless, He either believes it or He doesn't; He can't *now* not believe it and later believe it. Relational facts about timeless beings may change, but non-relational ones cannot. So, on this view, a timeless God could not be omniscient, as long as His knowledge involves the having of beliefs. So, the position would not be that the view that God is timeless would provide a response to the incompatibility argument, while the view that He is in time would not. On the contrary, precisely the reverse would be true.

Of course, it would be open to one who takes the view that God is timeless (and accepts what the A-theorist is saying about truth) to deny that God's knowledge consists in having beliefs. The view might be that His knowing something consists simply in His being in a direct relation of cognitive awareness of the facts. It would be the sort of thing that Russell means by 'acquaintance knowledge' – the sort of thing we might naïvely take perception of ordinary physical objects to be; or the sort of thing we might take awareness of pains to be. But if God's knowledge consisted in this sort of direct relation, it would be possible for Him to come to know something, because His coming to know would involve merely a change in a relation, a change which arose from what He was related to, rather than an intrinsic change in Him. On this view there would be no reason why it should not be true at t_2 that God is aware of John's doing X at t_2, because that fact existed at that time, but not true at t_1 that He was aware of John's doing X at t_2, because there was no such fact for Him to be aware of at that time. On this picture, then, the facts He is aware of at one time may not be the same as the facts He is aware of at another time. But He will be omniscient as long as at any time He is aware of all the facts that exist at that time.

There may be, of course, be problems with this conception of knowledge. But suppose, nonetheless, that the view that God is timeless could offer a satisfactory response to the incompatibility argument by denying the assumption that God's knowledge consists in having beliefs. Even so that does not mean that the view that God is timeless would be in a better position to counter the incompatibility

argument than the view that God is in time, for there is no reason why one who holds that God is in time should not counter the argument in exactly the same way. So the problem posed by the argument would still not provide a good reason for adopting the timeless view.

Impossible 'because' pairs

The next argument for the fixity of the past is based on the impossibility of a certain sort of symmetrical 'because' pair. The idea is that it cannot (at any rate in certain cases) be the case both that *p* because *q* and that *q* because *p*. A similar argument could be deployed against the possibility of backwards causation based on the claim that it cannot be the case both that A caused B and that B caused A. But the present argument does not depend on assuming that all the occurrences of 'because' are causal. The argument, as I shall present it, is not an argument for the fixity of the past in general, but for its fixity in relation to God's belief about John's cutting the grass.

The argument proceeds like this. Suppose that:

(1) God believed at t_1 that John would cut the grass at t_2 and subsequently John had the power so to act that God would not have believed at t_1 that he would cut the grass at t_2, namely by refraining from cutting the grass at t_2.

Then it follows that:

(2) God believed at t_1 that John would cut the grass at t_2, because John cut the grass at t_2.

But, the argument continues, the following is, *in itself*, possible:

(3) John cut the grass at t_2 because God believed at t_1 that John would cut the grass at t_2.

The story might be this: John cut the grass because it was long, and it was long because God believed that John was going to cut it, and for that reason made it grow long.

However, the argument goes on, although (3) is possible in itself, it is not compatible with (2). So we need either to explain what prevents (2) from being true, if (3) is, or to explain what prevents (3) from being true, if (2) is. And the only satisfactory explanation is that (2) in itself is impossible. So (1) is impossible. So, the past in fixed in at least this respect.

What are we to make of this argument?

First we might question whether (2) and (3) are actually incompatible. For certainly not all such symmetrical 'because' pairs are impossible. Suppose, for instance, that Mary did the washing-up on Saturday, and that John did it

on Sunday because Mary had done it the day before – perhaps they took turns. It will also be true that Mary did it the day before because John did it on Sunday – simply because this follows from the fact that Mary did it on Saturday and John did it on Sunday. So one way we can have a permissible symmetrical pair is where the truth of one of the 'because' sentences is just a consequence of logical entailment. Or suppose that John wrote 'Mary' on her birthday card. Then presumably he wrote 'y' on the birthday card because he wrote 'Mary'; but that doesn't stop it also being the case that he wrote 'Mary' because he wrote 'y' – given that he had first written 'Mar'.[6] So another way we can have a permissible symmetrical pair is where one of the 'because' sentences owes its truth to one event's being a constituent of another. Now, of course, if we were questioning the claim that it is a hard fact about t_1, if it is a fact at all, that God believed at t_1 that John would cut the grass at t_2, we might well think that the pair in question was permissible on similar grounds. But given that we are not questioning the claim, we do not have any reason on that score to question the claim that (2) and (3) are not compatible.

There may, of course, be residual doubts about whether (2) and (3) are in fact incompatible. If they are not, this argument for the fixity of the past fails. But it is, I take it, sufficiently plausible that they are incompatible to consider where the supposition that they are takes us. So let us grant, for the sake of argument, that (2) and (3) are incompatible.

We might, however, still question another crucial claim that the argument makes: the claim that we need either to explain what prevents (2) from being true, if (3) is, or to explain what prevents (3) from being true, if (2) is; and that the only satisfactory explanation is that (2) in itself is impossible. So far this claim is unsubstantiated. Is it even plausible?

Well, I think that the argument is right about one thing. It is not sufficient to say that, if (3) is true, (2) cannot be; and if (2) is true, (3) cannot be; and that is all there is to it. I think that we need to try to explain what it could be about the circumstances in which (3) is true which might prevent (2) from being true; or else to explain what it could be about the circumstances in which (2) is true which might prevent (3) from being true. The argument is also right that *one* possible explanation is that (2) is simply impossible. The question is whether there are other explanations.

Let us consider first why it might seem that there was a problem about explaining what might prevent (3)'s being true if (2) were true. Well, we have a story about how (3) might be true: John cut the grass because it was long, and it was long because God believed that John was going to cut it, and for that reason made it grow long. Suppose then that (2) were true, that God believed at t_1 that John would cut the grass at t_2, because John cut the grass at t_2. Surely that could have no bearing on whether John cut the grass because it was long; and surely it could have no bearing on whether the grass was long because God made

it grow long; so, if the circumstances in which (2) is true prevent the story from being true, it must be because they prevent its being the case that God made the grass long because he believed that John was going to cut it. But that seems curious; given that God did believe that John was going to cut the grass, how could it be impossible in the circumstances for Him to make the grass long for that reason? That is the apparent problem.

But in fact there seem to be at least two possible answers. The first is that what makes it impossible for God to make the grass grow long because He believes that John will cut it, is the very fact that the ancestry of His belief is what it is. If it is because God made the grass long that John cuts it, and it is because John cuts it that God believes that John will cut it, that in itself prevents God from making it long *because* He believes that John will cut it. There is nothing more to it than that.

Is this answer acceptable? It might be argued that it is not; it might be argued that the ancestry of God's belief can no more *in itself* explain the impossibility of His willing something on the basis of it, than the causal ancestry of an event can *in itself* have any bearing on what that event can cause. I must confess that I am not myself convinced that either of these things is impossible. So I would regard this first answer as perfectly acceptable. But there is, in any case, another possible answer.

The second answer is that, if God knows that John will cut the grass, He will also know that he will do so because the grass is long. Now, although God's knowledge that the grass will be long is, of course, compatible with His willing that the grass should be long, He surely cannot will that the grass should be long *because* He knows that it will be. For that to be the case, His knowledge that the grass will be long would have to be for Him a reason for willing that it should be. But for Him to will this on that basis would be irrational. And that is incompatible with His nature. But, if He cannot will that the grass should be long on the basis of His knowledge that it will be, surely He cannot will that it should be on the basis of His knowledge that John will cut it either – at any rate if His knowledge of this includes His knowledge of why John will cut it. So the second answer is that what prevents (3) from being true, if (2) is, is God's nature.

I note in passing that, if the first suggested answer is acceptable, it would be possible in principle to suggest a parallel account of how the circumstances in which (3) was true might prevent (2) from being true. But, in the present context, we shall be less interested in cases where (3) is true but (2) is not. For, if (3) were true but (2) were not, that would seem to mean that John did not have the power so to act that God would not have believed that he would cut the grass – at any rate if (2) follows from (1), as the argument claims. That is, we would have a case where John did not in fact have the power to do otherwise.

Suppose, though, that neither of the two suggested answers is satisfactory. Then it may after all be that (2) is impossible; so it may after all be that (1)

is impossible and that the past is fixed in at least in this respect. But in that case we would seem to be in just as much trouble in explaining how God could know about John's grass-cutting on the supposition that He is timeless. For we will again be faced with an apparently impossible pair:

> (2′) God timelessly believes that John cuts the grass at t_2, because John cut the grass at t_2;
> (3′) John cut the grass at t_2 because God timelessly believes that John cuts the grass at t_2;

the story being that John cut the grass because it was long, and it was long because God timeless believes that John cuts it, and for that reason timelessly wills that it grow long.

And if the proposed answers were unacceptable in the temporal case, it seems that they must equally fail in the atemporal case. So we will have to conclude that (2′) impossible. But, if (2) follows from (1), by parity of reasoning (2′) follows from:

> (1′) God timelessly believes that John cuts the grass at t_2 and at some time John has the power so to act that God would not have believed that he would cut the grass at t_2, namely by refraining from cutting the grass at t_2.

So, if (2′) is impossible, so is (1′). So the timeless realm is fixed in at least this respect.

So, if the argument succeeds, the view that God is timeless would not solve the problem posed by the incompatibility argument, because there would be an equally good argument for the fixity of God's timeless belief about John. And that accords with my primary thesis.

A causal account of temporal order

I turn now to a type of argument for the fixity of the past which is based on the claim that temporal order is determined by causal order.

Now the original argument does not make any claims about causation. But one might argue as follows. If John has the power so to act at t_2 that God would have held a different belief from the one He actually held at t_1 (namely by refraining from doing X at t_2), that means that, if John had not done X at t_2, God would not have believed at t_1 that he would; but that means that John's doing X caused God's belief. To be sure, from the fact that, if A had not happened, B would not have happened it does not always follow that A *caused* B. As Jaegwon Kim has pointed on in connexion with David Lewis's attempt to analyse causation in terms of counterfactual dependency, there are a number of counter-examples.[7] Some involve cases where B's happening depends logically (analytically) on A's happening; others involve cases where A's happening is a constituent of B's

happening; others involve cases where A is an action which is a way of performing action B – in Kim's example, if I opened the window by turning the knob, it is true that if I had not turned the knob, I would not have opened the window, but not true that my turning the knob caused my opening of the window (though it did cause the window to be open). But none of these cases suggest that we could have a case where it is a hard fact about one time that A occurred and a hard fact about another time that B occurred, and it is also the case that, if A had not happened, B would not have happened, and yet *not* the case that A caused B.

Of course, this claim about causation would not be very plausible if one thought that, if A caused B, it followed that there was a deterministic law in virtue of which, in the circumstances, given that A happened, it was bound to be the case that B happened; nor even if one thought that, if A caused B, it followed that there was a deterministic law by virtue of which, in the circumstances, given that B happened, it was bound to be the case that A happened. For it surely could be the case that, if I had not believed that *p*, I would not have done X, without the obtaining of any such deterministic laws. But the thought that there is a necessary connection between causation and the obtaining of deterministic laws is, at the very least, questionable. So the argument is at least sufficiently plausible for it to be worth investigating.

Now the sort of argument I have in mind would proceed by claiming that certain crucial temporal relations are to be explained in terms of facts about causation; that is to say that the obtaining of these relations consists in the obtaining of certain facts about causation. It would then go on to argue that it follows from the explanation that no event can cause an earlier event – that backwards causation is impossible.

There are various alternatives for such an account: it may aim to give an analysis which applies to everything which is capable of entering into causal relations, or just to a restricted range of things; it may analyse temporal relations in terms of *actual* causal relations, or in terms of *possible* causal relations; it may aim to give a complete account of temporal relations in terms causal relations, or just a partial account. What I shall argue first is that, if the account is to rule out the possibility of backwards causation, it had better aim to give a complete account of temporal relations in terms of causal relations, at least with respect to the range of things to which it applies.

I claim that it had better aim to give a complete account of temporal relations in terms of causal relations. To see this, let us consider how one might develop an account of temporal relations in terms of causation which would rule out the possibility of backwards causation. The obvious way to start is to claim that:

(1) If A causes B (or is capable of causing it, if the account is in terms of possible causation), the fact that A is earlier than B is constituted by this fact.

But that will be permissible only if one does not suppose that it immediately follows from the fact that A is earlier than B that B is not earlier than A. This is for two reasons. The first is that it is not clear that the possibility of temporal loops can be ruled out a priori. The second is that, even if one takes the view that temporal loops are impossible, one cannot simply *stipulate* that this is so; one must develop an account of the relation of being earlier than which has this consequence. So the next move is to argue that:

(2) If A causes (or is capable of causing) B, B cannot be earlier than A.

To argue for (2) one is going to have to rely on some logical features of causation; in particular one is going to have to rely on the impossibility of causal loops (or of loops of possible causation). Supposing that the relevant sort of loop is impossible, that would certainly mean that the following was impossible:

(3) A is earlier than B because A causes (is capable of causing) B and, nonetheless, B causes A.

However, it would not so far rule out the following:

(4) A is earlier than B because A causes (is capable of causing) B, B causes C, and C is simultaneous with A; so, B causes something earlier than itself.

It does not rule (4) out, because (4) does not imply the existence of causal loops, for all that has been said so far. Evidently to rule (4) out it is going to be necessary to give an account of simultaneity in terms of causal relations. And notice that it will be necessary to give a complete account of simultaneity: it would not be sufficient, say, to give an account of simultaneity which applied only to things occupying different spatio-temporal locations; for, to rule out the possibility of backwards causation, the account must rule out the possibility of the following:

(5) A causes B and B causes something other than A but coinciding spatio-temporally with A.

That is to say, it is going to be necessary to give a complete account of temporal relations in terms of causation. And that means a complete account of temporality in the case of things to which the account applies. Of course, I am not saying that it is possible to give such an account. I am claiming only that it would be necessary for an account to be like this if it is to rule out the possibility of backwards causation by analysing temporal relations in causal terms.

Let us suppose, then, that we have such a complete account, and that it does indeed rule out the possibility of backwards causation in the case of the class of things to which it applies. Then we need first to ask whether this account applies to God; in particular, does it apply to God's believing that John does X at t_2? If it does, then, if the account is correct, it means that God's belief occurs in

time, if it is caused by John's doing X. So, insofar as the incompatibility argument relies on this argument for the fixity of the past, it cannot be a reason for adopting a timeless view of God.

Suppose, on the other hand, that the account does not apply to God. Maybe it applies only to spatial items, for instance, and it does not apply to God for that reason. (But notice that one cannot say that whether it applies to God depends on whether God is *temporal* or not. Insofar as it applies to anything, it gives a complete account of the temporal relations of objects like that; that is, it gives a complete account of their temporality. So, whether it applies to something cannot depend on whether that thing is temporal.) Well, if the account does not apply to God, we need to ask what, if anything, it implies about the items to which it does not apply; and, in particular, what it implies about God. And here there seem to be two possibilities.

The first possibility is that the account implies that such items, and God in particular, are not temporal items at all. In that case, if the account is correct, we indeed have a reason for adopting the view that God is timeless; but we have this reason simply on the basis of this account of time, and without any appeal to the incompatibility argument.

The second possibility (though not very likely, perhaps) is that the account says nothing at all about the temporal relations, if any, of items to which it does not apply. But in that case, even if correct, it would not rule out the possibility that John's doing X at t_2 should cause God's belief at t_1; and so it would not rule out John's having the power so to act at t_2 that God would have held a different belief from the one He actually held at t_1. So it would leave it open that the past was in this crucial respect not fixed after all.

So, either this sort of account of time does not imply that the past is fixed, or, even it is does, the account means that the incompatibility argument does not provide a reason for adopting a timeless view of God. And this accords with my primary thesis.

Direct intuition

That concludes the argument for my primary thesis: that, insofar as the incompatibility argument is based on an argument for the fixity of the past, it does not provide a good reason for adopting a timeless view of God. However, it remains open that one might believe in the fixity of the past, not on the basis of argument, and not for any of the reasons I have considered, but simply on the basis of direct intuition. Might the incompatibility argument in that case constitute a good reason for adopting a timeless view? Let us consider a number of different positions one might occupy, if one believes in the fixity of the past on the basis of direct intuition:

(1) One subscribes to an A-theory of time.

In that case, as I have argued above, a timeless view of God does not put one in a better position to respond to the incompatibility argument.

(2) One's direct intuition is not actually that the past is fixed, but rather that it is only the future which is open, which is not fixed.

But, if *that* is one's reason for believing in the fixity of the past, one will, of course, have an equally good reason for believing in the fixity of timeless facts.

Let us suppose, then that one's intuition is specifically about the past; it is not its non-futurity that makes it fixed; it is its pastness. Let us ask what view it is reasonable in that case for one to take about the fixity or otherwise of timeless facts. First let us consider this position:

(3) One believes that the past is fixed simply because of its pastness; but, independently of the incompatibility argument, one lacks any view about whether timeless facts about God's beliefs would be fixed.

Would it be reasonable, in the light of the incompatibility argument, to be persuaded that they are not fixed? This may surely be doubted for two reasons. The first is that, insofar as one has decided views about the fixity or otherwise of *any* timeless facts, it will surely be that they are fixed. Surely one will think this about necessary truths, for instance; and surely also about laws of nature, if one supposes them to be timeless, rather than as obtaining as of a certain time. (That is not to say that one could not suppose both that they are timeless and that they God timelessly created them. What seems impossible, if one believes in the fixity of the past, is to suppose that they are timeless and that God created them at a time.) The second (more important) reason is that it seems quite unsafe to suppose that hard timeless facts would be more like facts about the future, as far as fixity goes, than like facts about the past. So, if one occupies this second position, I suggest that one should be reluctant to accept the timeless view without independent reasons for doing so. One should consider whether there are not alternative responses to the incompatibility argument. One should, for instance, consider whether the perfection of God's knowledge requires *omniscience* – at least of the sort assumed by the incompatibility argument.

But what if one has an independent reason for thinking that timeless facts need not be fixed? Then what about these independent reasons? What if they themselves are based on independent reasons for believing that God is timeless; that is,

(4) One believes that the past is fixed simply because of its pastness; one has independent reasons for thinking that timeless facts need not be fixed. And one believes this because one has independent reasons for believing that God is timeless.

But in that case the incompatibility argument would at best provide additional support for one's belief that God is timeless. It would not provide an independent reason for it.

Finally, one's position might be this:

(5) One believes that the past is fixed simply because of its pastness; one has independent reasons for thinking that timeless facts need not be fixed, and these are not based on any prior belief that God is timeless.

Then perhaps the incompatibility argument would provide a reason for believing that God is timeless. But perhaps not. It might be equally reasonable, in the light of one's intuition about the fixity of the past, to abandon one's belief that timeless facts need not be fixed. And it might be equally reasonable, in the light of one's belief that timeless facts need not be fixed, to abandon one's belief in the fixity of the past.

Conclusion

The incompatibility argument appeals to the principle that the past is fixed. I have argued that, insofar as one believes in the fixity of the past on the basis of an argument, the incompatibility argument does not provide a good reason for adopting the view that God is timeless. I have further argued that, even if one's belief in the fixity of the past is not based on an argument, but on simple intuition, it will be at best highly questionable whether the incompatibility argument provides a good reason for adopting the view that God is timeless. So, if one does believe that God is timeless, it would be as well to believe this for other reasons.

Notes

1. Nelson Pike 'Divine omniscience and voluntary action', *The Philosophical Review*, **74** (1965), 31–35.
2. Here and elsewhere I make use of the natural convention that 't_1' refers to an earlier time than 't_2'; and so on.
3. This is essentially the same as the account of fixity given by John Martin Fischer in John Martin Fischer (ed.) *God, Foreknowledge and Freedom* (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 1989), 6.
4. It is in fact remarkably difficult to give a precise account of what constitutes hardness in a fact which captures everything one would intuitively like to capture, and which makes FP a plausible principle. See *ibid.*, 32–48. But, fortunately, for present purposes such precision is not essential.
5. See Linda Zagzebski *The Dilemma of Freedom and Foreknowledge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 61; and Marilyn McCord Adams *William Ockham* (Notre Dame IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1987), 1135.
6. I owe the idea behind this example to Jaegwon Kim 'Causes and counterfactuals', *Journal of Philosophy*, **70** (1973), 571.
7. *Ibid.*, 570–572.