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Are alternative pasts plausible? A reply to Thomas Flint

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Abstract: **Thomas Flint has claimed that my argument against Molinism suffers from a 'seemingly irreparable logical gap'. He also contests a key assumption of that argument, namely that 'something which has had causal consequences in the past is ipso facto a hard, fixed, settled fact about the past'. In reply, I show that there is no logical gap at all in the argument. And I argue that, even though Molinists have reasons, based on Molinist principles, for rejecting the assumption in question, the assumption is indeed extremely plausible. Thus, the argument creates difficulties for Molinism that are more severe than Flint is willing to admit.**

In 'A new anti-anti-Molinist argument', Thomas Flint states that my formal argument against Molinism suffers 'from a seemingly irreparable logical gap'; he also contests a key assumption of that argument.[1] I shall briefly respond to both points.

Flint claims that the step from

(8) It is not in an agent's power to bring about the truth of the counterfactuals of freedom about her,

to

(9) It is not in A's power to bring it about that $(C \rightarrow \sim Z)$[2]

is 'invalid as it stands', and although he devotes several pages to exploring possible repairs for the argument, he concludes that none of the possibilities is very promising.

In fact the step in question is perfectly valid, though perhaps its validity is not as obvious as I had assumed it to be. Let me say, first of all, that I was indeed thinking of (8) as a necessary truth, and perhaps I should have said so explicitly. (8) clearly has the status of a metaphysical principle (if it is true at all), and it is hard to see how its truth could vary from world to world. With that understood, the step from (8) to (9) can be justified formally as follows:

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(1) In no possible world is it in an agent's power to bring about the truth of any of the counterfactuals of freedom about her. (Premise)
(2) In no possible world does an agent bring about the truth of any of the counterfactuals of freedom about her. (From 1)
(3) Suppose that in some world *w*, A brings it about that $(C \rightarrow \sim Z)$. (Assumption for *reductio*)
(4) In *w*, $(C \rightarrow \sim Z)$ is a true counterfactual of freedom about A. (From 3)
(5) In *w*, A brings about the truth of a counterfactual of freedom about her. (From 3, 4)

But this contradicts (2), so we must conclude that

(6) In no possible world does A bring it about that $(C \rightarrow \sim Z)$. (From 2–5, by *reductio*)

But what one does in no possible world one lacks the power to do, so

(7) In no possible world does A have the power to bring it about that $(C \rightarrow \sim Z)$. (From 6)[3]

The key assumption Flint contests (he calls it 'Hasker's Assumption' or *HA*) is that, as he puts it, 'something which has had causal consequences in the past is ipso facto a hard, fixed, settled fact about the past'. I used this in my argument to show that the counterfactuals of freedom must be counted as part the world's history – of its 'fixed past' – a result that is devastating for Molinism. I claimed that *HA* is 'extremely plausible'; Flint retorts that 'Molinists have a powerful basis for rejecting *HA*'. Now, this is undoubtedly true – Molinists do have strong reasons *based on Molinism itself* for rejecting *HA*. In addition to the considerations cited by Flint in his reply to me, there is the fact that (as I've just pointed out) *HA* leads to conclusions that would force the abandonment of Molinism. But of course, this fact in no way contradicts my claim that this principle is extremely plausible. And it is that claim that I now wish to reinforce.

Professor Flint and I agree on the following characterization of libertarian free will: If I am free in performing an action, then at the time I perform it both my performing it freely and my refraining from performing it freely are entirely possible – either of the two outcomes is something that *really could happen*.[4] But now suppose that, at the time when I perform the action, there is some event in the causally relevant past that would have to be different than it is if I refrain from the action. In this case, it seems I am confronted with *alternative causal pasts*, either of which can be the *actual* past, depending on what I now decide to do. And that is a scary thought.

To make this more concrete, consider an example discussed at length by Flint, namely Jesus' prediction that Peter would deny him, and Peter's subsequent fulfilment of that prediction.[5] Peter, let us assume, is completely free with regard

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to denying Jesus; both his denying Jesus and his refraining from so doing are really possible. But of course, since Jesus is divinely infallible, Peter's refraining from denying Jesus is logically inconsistent with Jesus' having prophesied Peter's denial. And so Peter is confronted with alternative possible futures: one in which he denies Jesus, and another in which he does not. But Peter also has *alternative possible pasts*; in one of these pasts, Jesus has *not* predicted that Peter will deny him, and this past is *really possible*, it really could turn out to be the actual past, in spite of the fact that Jesus' prediction is still ringing in Peter's ears.[6] At this point, judgments of plausibility are best left to the reader.

Notes

1. See William Hasker 'A new anti-Molinist argument', *Religious Studies*, **35** (1999), 291–297, and Thomas P. Flint 'A new anti-anti-Molinist argument', *Religious Studies*, **35** (1999), 299–305.
2. As in my 'A new anti-Molinist argument', the single arrow indicates the connective for the counterfactual conditional. $(C \rightarrow \sim Z)$ states that, under circumstances C, A would refrain from performing the action designated by Z.
3. I am happy to be able to state that Thomas Flint now accepts this argument as valid.
4. This is, of course, the famous 'principle of alternative possibilities', a principle which is sometimes thought to have been refuted by the (vastly overrated) 'Frankfurt counterexamples'.
5. See Thomas P. Flint *Divine Providence*, ch. 9.
6. It is perhaps worth pointing out that there are other possible interpretations of the text in question. It might be that, given Peter's past history and present state of mind, it was psychologically impossible for him to resist the pressures of the situation and acknowledge his relationship with Jesus. Or, the prophecy might be regarded as conditional, so that it need not be fulfilled if Peter's frame of mind were to change in the appropriate way.

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