

On Hasker's Defense of Anti-Molinism

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SUMMARY

In a pair of recent articles, William Hasker has attempted to defend Robert Adams's new anti-Molinist argument. But I argue that the sense of explanatory priority operative in the argument is either equivocal or, if a univocal sense can be given to it, it is either so generic that we should have to deny its transitivity or so weak that it would not be incompatible with human freedom.

ON HASKER'S DEFENSE OF ANTI-MOLINISM

In a pair of recent articles [1] William Hasker has endorsed and defended Robert Adams's new anti-Molinist argument [2]:

1. According to Molinism, the truth of all true counterfactuals of freedom about us is explanatorily prior to God's decision to create us.
2. God's decision to create us is explanatorily prior to our existence.
3. Our existence is explanatorily prior to all of our choices and actions.
4. The relation of explanatory priority is transitive.
5. Therefore it follows from Molinism (by 1-4) that the truth of all true counterfactuals of freedom about us is explanatorily prior to all of our choices and actions.
10. It follows also from Molinism that if I freely do action A in circumstances C, then there is a true counterfactual of freedom F*, which says that if I were in C, then I would (freely) do A.
11. Therefore, it follows from Molinism that if I freely do A in C, the truth of F* is explanatorily prior to my choosing and acting as I do in C.
12. If I freely do A in C, no truth that is strictly inconsistent with my refraining from A in C is explanatorily prior to my choosing and acting as I do in C.
13. The truth of F* (which says that if I were in C, then I would do A) is strictly inconsistent with my refraining from A in C.

14. If Molinism is true, then if I freely do A in C, F* both is (by 11) and is not (by 12-13) explanatorily prior to my choosing and acting as I do in C.

15. Therefore, (by 14) if Molinism is true, then I do not freely do A in C.

Hasker likes this argument because it has the advantage of avoiding reliance on one of the most controversial premisses of his own critique of middle knowledge; moreover, he considers it immune to objections which have been lodged against it.

In response to Adams's argument, I had complained that the notion of "explanatory priority" employed is equivocal and that if a univocal sense can be given it, there is no reason to expect it to be transitive. [3] I maintained that none of the senses of "explanatory priority" operative in (1)-(3) have application to the peculiar priority inferred in (5). I offered the following parallel argument as an illustration: suppose my wife and I are considering starting a family and that we come to believe that

A.* If children were born to us, they would come to love God.

Since this is important to us, we decide to start a family. Accordingly,

1*. The truth of (A*) is explanatorily prior to our decision to have children.

It is also undeniably true that

2*. Our decision to have children is explanatorily prior to the existence of our children.

3*. Our children's existence is explanatorily prior to their coming to love God.

So if (4) is true, we must conclude that

5*. The truth of (A*) is explanatorily prior to our children's coming to love God.

But the sense of explanatory priority in (5*) is utterly obscure.

Hasker defends Adams's argument against the charge of equivocity by enunciating a very broad conception of explanatory priority which is univocal in (1)-(3) and yet transitive: for contingent states of affairs p and q ,

EP: p is explanatorily prior to q iff p must be included in a complete explanation of why q obtains

Hasker asserts, "It should be apparent that explanatory priority as explicated by (EP) is transitive: if

p is explanatorily prior to q , and q to r , then clearly p must be included in a complete explanation of why r obtains." [4] But this is not at all clear. As Hasker observes, such a relation must also be irreflexive: "a contingent state of affairs cannot constitute an explanation (in whole or in part) of itself." [5] But if the relation described by (EP) is transitive, then it seems that the condition of irreflexivity is violated. My wife and I not infrequently find ourselves in the situation that I want to do something if she wants to do it, and she wants to do it if I want to do it. Suppose, then, that John is going to the party because Mary is going, and Mary is going to the party because John is going. It follows that if the (EP) relation is transitive, John is going to the party because John is going to the party, which conclusion is obviously wrong. Not only is such a conclusion explanatorily vacuous, but it also implies, in conjunction with (12), that John does not freely go to the party--the very conclusion Hasker wants to avoid. [6]

Hasker also rebuts my counter-example based on (A^*), noting that what is explanatorily prior to our decision is merely our (fallible) *belief* that (A^*) is true. But the disanalogy noted by Hasker is not an essential part of the illustration. My aim was to construct a parallel to Adams's (1)-(5) in which we as pro-creators take God's place as Creator and our children take our place as the products of (pro-)creation. (A^*) is then explanatorily prior to our decision in the same way that counterfactuals of creaturely freedom are explanatorily prior to God's decision. It is incidental to the issue of the transitivity and equivocity of explanatory priority whether our belief that (A^*) is knowledge or infallible; if desired, we can stipulate that we acquired such knowledge via the psychic hotline or a prophetic word from God. Thus, the illustration succeeds in showing the equivocity of Adams's argument or the intransitivity of the explanatory priority involved.

Now, of course, in a certain sense the Molinist agrees that the truth of all true counterfactuals of freedom about us is explanatorily prior to all of our choices and actions, as (5) states, though this does not follow from (1)-(4). For presumably the divine creative decree was guided by God's knowledge of true counterfactuals of creaturely freedom. But I also argued that Adams's (12) is false, first, because it represents the fallacious reasoning of fatalism and, second, because my being able to refrain from doing A in C is not a necessary condition of my freely doing A in C , so that the argument is unsound.

In his "Middle Knowledge: a Refutation Revisited," Hasker endorses Adams's (12); [7] but he fails to respond to my two criticisms of it. Instead, he attempts to formulate an explication of "brings about" which is equivalent to his favored Power Entailment Principle. [8] That principle is vital to his inference that if one can bring it about that $A \& \sim B$, then one can bring it about that $A \Box \rightarrow \sim B$, which Hasker claims to have proven impossible. Unfortunately, Hasker has yet to answer either my intuitive objections to his principle [9] or my counter-examples to it. [10] If we accept my proposed alternative

PEP's: If it is in S 's power to bring it about that P , and " P " entails " Q " and " Q " is false, and Q is a consequence of P , then it is in S 's power to bring it about that Q

then, plausibly, $A \Box \rightarrow \sim B$ is not a consequence of $A \& \sim B$, and so one's bringing about the latter does not entail that one brings about the former. Suppose, for example, that I hear a knock at the door and go to answer it. Then it is true that if I were to hear a knock at the door, I should go answer it. But the truth of that counterfactual is surely not a consequence of my actual actions, for even if I am asleep and so fail to hear the knock and answer the door, it may well still be true that if I were to hear a knock at the door, I should go answer it. So in the case at hand, my putative inability to bring about $A \Box \rightarrow \sim B$ does not entail my inability to bring about $A \& \sim B$.

Even if the Molinist simply concedes the truth of (5) in the sense of explanatory priority explicated in Hasker's (EP), that notion is so weak that (12) is all the more obviously false. For counterfactuals concerning our free actions may be explanatorily prior to those actions in Hasker's sense only because God's reason for creating us may have been in part that He knew we should freely do such things. But it is wholly mysterious how this sense of explanatory priority is incompatible with our performing such actions freely. In a footnote to his second piece, Hasker claims that Adams's argument can be freed from reliance on (12), referring the reader to his own argument against middle knowledge. [11] But the duly attentive reader will find in that discussion nothing but a reiteration of Hasker's previous argument on this score with no refutation of the several objections lodged against it in the literature. [12]

Thus, it seems to me that neither Adams nor Hasker has been able to explicate a sense of explanatory priority with respect to the truth of counterfactuals of creaturely freedom which is both transitive and inimical to human freedom. Either the notion of "explanatory priority" as it plays a role in the argument is equivocal or, if a univocal sense can be given to it, any such notion is either so generic that we should have to deny its transitivity or so weak that it would not be inimical to human freedom.

Footnotes:

[1]

William Hasker, "Middle Knowledge: a Refutation Revisited," *Faith and Philosophy* 12 (1995): 223-36; idem, "Explanatory Priority: Transitive and Unequivocal, A Reply to William Craig," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 57 (1997): 1-5.

[2]

Robert Merrihew Adams, "An Anti-Molinist Argument, " in *Philosophical Perspectives*, vol. 5: *Philosophy of Religion*, ed. James E. Tomberlin (Atascadero, Calif.: Ridgeway Publishing, 1991), pp. 343-353.

[3]

William Lane Craig, "Robert Adams's New Anti-Molinist Argument," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 54 (1994): 857-861.

[4]

Hasker, "Explanatory Priority," p. 3.

[5]

Ibid.

[6]

For $p \Box \rightarrow q$ is strictly inconsistent with $p \sim q$. Suppose, then, that John, unaware of Mary's affection for him, does not realize that Mary would go to the party if he went, but that he is determined to go if she does. Let $p \Box \rightarrow q$ be the proposition expressed by "If Mary were to go to the party, then I would go." This proposition is, in Hasker's sense, explanatorily prior to John's decision to go under the circumstances that Mary is going to the party. But it is strictly inconsistent with John's not going under those circumstances. According to (12), we must therefore say that John does not freely choose or go to the party, which seems ridiculous. When taken in Hasker's sense, (12) would often make it impossible to act freely for reasons.

Perhaps Hasker would say, in line with his response below, that all that is explanatorily prior to John's going to the party is his *belief* that Mary is going. But such a response appeals to a red herring, *viz.*, the fact that John believes that Mary is going, whereas we are free simply to stipulate as part of our thought experiment that John would not go to the party if Mary were not to go.

[7]

Hasker, "Middle Knowledge," p. 235, note 17.

[8]

Ibid., pp. 229-232.

[\[9\]](#)

William Lane Craig, "Hasker on Divine Knowledge," *Philosophical Studies* 67 (1992): 91-92.

[\[10\]](#)

William Lane Craig, *Divine Foreknowledge and Human Freedom*, Brill's Studies in Intellectual History 19 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1990), pp. 89-90.

[\[11\]](#)

Hasker, "Explanatory Priority," p. 1. The reference is to Hasker, "Middle Knowledge," pp. 223-236.

[\[12\]](#)

In "Middle Knowledge," pp. 226-239, Hasker revises the *first* part of his argument in deference to Adams's version, but the *second* part he leaves unchanged and undefended--indeed, in footnote 17 on p. 235 he actually commends Adams's (12) as an alternative to his argument for those "who have qualms about some of the premises in my version of the argument."