Temporal necessity; Hard facts/soft facts

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In recent years the problem of theological fatalism has been extensively discussed within the philosophical and theological community, and the most recent contributions have served to focus the debate on the notion of temporal necessity. Unfortunately, the discussion has, I believe, for the most part wandered off the proper course and needs to be re-oriented in a different direction. In order to find our way, therefore, we need to retrace our steps to see where we have gone wrong and attempt to strike out again along the correct path.

Contemporary debate from Pike to Plantinga

John Turk Saunders

The current debate stems from Saunders's reply to Pike's original paper on fatalism, with which I shall assume the reader is familiar. Although Saunders perceived the counterfactual solution to Pike's argument, his reply to Pike was nevertheless misleading because Saunders is, I think, committed to compatibilism, which colors his reasoning. He argues, for example, that (i) if the world is governed by empirical laws such that if a man were to decide to skip, then he would follow through and not change his mind, and (ii) if I decided at $t_1$ to skip at $t_2$, then I still have the power, that is, the ability, to run. But had I run, my decision at $t_1$ would have been different. My ability to run and the fact that it is my own decision which leads me to persevere in my decision to skip rather than to run logically guarantee that I skip of my own free will and that it is in my power to change my mind and run. I could exercise my power to run, but given my decision and the empirical laws, I would not. If we reject this account, opines Saunders, we must say either that my decision compels me to do what I do or that some sort of indeterminism is essential to human freedom. He concludes that one has the power to act such that the past would have been different than it is.

The argument is suggestive, but the introduction of the empirical laws and the
slap at indeterminism are unfortunate, for if it is the laws that causally determine me to follow through on my decision and not to change my mind, then it is difficult to see how I am free to run at $t_2$, even if it lies within my ability to do so. Saunders's argument would contribute more to a defense of freedom if the empirical determinism were omitted. In fact, Saunders employed such an argument against Talor's fatalism. He maintained that the principle

1. No agent has the power to perform an act, a past necessary condition of which is lacking

is false. For if we suppose that one's own decision is a necessary condition of some subsequent action, then if that decision were lacking one would be powerless to perform the act, which is absurd. If all other necessary conditions for the action were present and I decided to perform the action, then we should have to say that I was compelled by my own decision to perform the action, which is nonsense. I am free to perform the action or to refrain, but were I to refrain I should not have decided to perform the action. This line of argument is not compatibilistic, though Saunders later moved in the opposite direction toward a compatibilist view of freedom.

In any case, Saunders argues against Pike that just as it is within my power so to act that my past decision would have been different, so it lies within my power so to act that God's foreknowledge would have been different. As an example of such power, Saunders introduces the celebrated illustration of one's ability so to act that Caesar would not have died 2009 years before the writing of his article.

Nelson Pike

In his rejoinder to Saunders, Pike seizes upon the Caesar illustration and contrasts it with my ability so to act that Caesar would not have died on the Senate steps. Confessing that he has no criterion for discriminating between two such cases, Pike nevertheless believes it is clear that there are "hard" facts about the past, like Caesar's death on the steps, while other facts are not "fully accomplished" or "over-and-done-with." It is only with regard to this latter category of soft facts that it is within one's power so to act that the past would have been other than it was. But a person's belief in the past is a hard fact: either he believed something or he did not, and there is nothing we can do to change it. With regard to Saunders's skip/run illustration, Pike claims that if I ran at $t_2$, this would not normally change the decision at $t_1$, but would merely mean that a new decision was reached in the interval. The problem with Saunders's example, Pike continues, is that he envisions a universe in which the causal laws are such that if one decides to skip, then he skips; but it is not then physiologically and psychologically impossible for me to change my mind? It is not at all clear that it was within my power to run at $t_2$ — certainly the skipping was my action, but how could I have done otherwise?