ABSTRACT. In an article published several years ago, 1 Nelson Pike recast his well known argument for the incompatibility of divine omniscience and human freedom in terms of a "possible worlds" analysis of human power. In this version, the argument is based on the assumption that past circumstances in the actual world "help to determine present powers." 2 If I am able to do something at the present time, Pike claims, there must be a possible world with a past just like the past of the actual world in which I do it.

In a recent discussion, 3 Joshua Hoffman attacks Pike's argument and the analysis of power on which it is based. Specifically, he presents two objections to Pike's thesis about past circumstances helping to determine present powers. Both objections are attempts to produce counterexamples to Pike's claim.

In the present paper, I hope to accomplish two things. I shall try to work out a reasonably precise formulation of the thesis about power on which Pike bases his argument. I shall also try to show that both of Hoffman's objections to Pike's thesis are mistaken. I shall argue that one of them is based on a serious misinterpretation of Pike's claim, and is successful only against a thesis that is not required for Pike's argument. The remaining objection, I shall argue, is based on a claim that is demonstrably false.

Whether or not Pike's thesis about power is correct is a larger question that I will not try to decide here. My only concern is to meet Hoffman's objections.

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Let us begin with a brief account of the possible worlds analysis of human power that Pike proposes. To say of a man that he has the power to do X at a time T is to say, not just that there is a (logically) possible world in which he does X at T, but that there is a possible world like the actual world in certain relevant respects, in which he does X at T. Thus, it is not within the power of any human being to fly (without the aid of some mechanical device) even though there is a possible world in which some human beings fly. This is because all such worlds differ from the actual one in certain relevant respects. There is, for example, no possible world in which we have the same bodies and in which the same causal laws obtain and in which any of us fly.

Having the same body and being subject to the same causal laws are thus examples of what Pike means by "relevant respects." They are not the only ones, however. Pike claims—and this is fundamental to his entire argument—that past circumstances are relevant to the determination of present powers. As he puts it in a passage quoted by Hoffman:

If we assume that what is within my power at a given moment determines a set of possible worlds, all of the members of that set will have to be worlds in which what has happened in the past relative to the given moment is precisely what has happened in the past relative to the given moment of the actual world.

It would be easy to read this passage as saying that every possible world in which I have the power to do anything at the present time is a world with a past exactly like the past of the actual world, and this seems to be the way Hoffman reads it. For he interprets Pike's claim about past circumstances determining present powers as meaning that the possession of each power by a person at a time T logically entails the entire history of the actual world prior to T. That this is how Hoffman interprets Pike's claim will be clear if we take a look at the criticisms of Pike with which he concludes his paper.

Hoffman argues that Pike's thesis about power must be false because there are some present powers that do not entail "that any contingent past circumstance did or did not obtain." For example, my ability at a time T to wink at a pretty girl does not even entail that I existed prior to T—"I may have been created at T possessing the power in question." Of course, Hoffman concedes that some present powers do entail the occurrence or nonoccurrence of some contingent past circumstances. For example, "the power to tease your sister for the first time" entails that you have not teased her previously. But it doesn't follow that every present power entails the occurrence or nonoccurrence of
some past circumstance. Thus, Hoffman concludes, Pike "has committed the fallacy of hasty generalization."9

But there is worse to come! Hoffman claims that "Pike commits the fallacy of hasty generalization a second time." Hoffman explains himself as follows.

We have seen that the possession of some powers entails the occurrence or nonoccurrence of some past circumstances. Although it doesn't follow from this that the possession of such a power entails the whole history of the world up to the time of possession, this is what Pike infers. Surely this is an unwarranted inference. To take the example we have already cited, my being able at T to tease my sister for the first time does entail that I have never before T teased her. But it doesn't entail that the Titanic sank or that Plato existed.10

I think this passage makes it quite clear that Hoffman is interpreting Pike's claim about past circumstances determining present powers as meaning that the possession of a power "entails the whole history of the world up to the time of possession." Thus he is able to "refute" Pike's claim by pointing out that my ability to tease my sister for the first time does not entail "that the Titanic sank or that Plato existed."

Hoffman thus has two criticisms of Pike's thesis about power. First, he claims that some present powers do not entail the occurrence or nonoccurrence of any contingent past circumstances. And second, he claims that even those that do entail some contingent past circumstances do not entail every past circumstance. I think both of these criticisms are seriously misguided. I'll deal with the second one first, and at some length. Then, at the end of this paper, I will make some brief comments about the first criticism.

As I indicated above, Hoffman's second criticism assumes that Pike is to be understood as saying that the possession of a power "entails the whole history of the world up to the time of possession." Interpreted in this way, Pike's thesis amounts to the absurd claim that, as a matter of logical necessity, we could not have had any of the powers we have if a single past circumstance had been different. But is this the correct interpretation? I think not. To see how Pike's thesis about power should be interpreted, let's take a look at it in the context of the argument it is supposed to support, viz., the argument for the incompatibility of divine omniscience and human freedom.

Going back now to the original problem, we have assumed that Jones does X at T2 and that God ex-
ists and is ever-lasting and essentially omniscient. It follows that God believes at T1 that Jones does X at T2. The question is whether it is within Jones' power at T2 to refrain from doing X. The question is not whether there is just some possible world or other in which Jones refrains from doing X at T2. What must be asked is whether there is a possible world, having a history prior to T2 that is indistinguishable from that of the actual world, in which Jones refrains from doing X at T2. The answer is that there is not. All such worlds contain an essentially omniscient being who believes at T1 that Jones does X at T2. There is no possible world of this description in which Jones refrains from doing X at T2.11

The crucial portion of this argument may be outlined as follows:

(1) If Jones has the power at T2 to refrain from doing X, then "there is a possible world, having a history prior to T2 that is indistinguishable from that of the actual world, in which Jones refrains from doing X at T2."

(2) Every possible world with a history prior to T2 that is indistinguishable from that of the actual world is a world in which an essentially omniscient being believes at T1 that Jones does X at T2.

(3) But no possible world in which an essentially omniscient being believes at T1 that Jones does X at T2 is a world in which Jones refrains from doing X at T2.

(4) It follows, from (2) and (3), that there is no possible world with a history indistinguishable from that of the actual world, in which Jones refrains from doing X at T2.

(5) Finally, (1) and (4) yield the desired conclusion: Jones does not have the power at T2 to refrain from doing X.

The argument is valid. Premises (2) and (3) are uncontroversial. (2) follows from the hypothesis under consideration: that Jones does X and that there is an essentially omniscient and ever-lasting God. (3) is an obvious conceptual truth. An essentially omniscient being is infallible. So there is no possible world in which the beliefs of such a being turn out to have been mistaken. This much is conceded on all sides. The dispute is over premise (1), which embodies the claim about human power that Hoffman means to chal-
I believe that Hoffman misinterprets this key premise, and that his second criticism has no bearing on its truth. But it will be easier to see just where Hoffman goes wrong if we eliminate an imprecision in the phrasing of (1). The antecedent clause of (1) fails to specify in which possible world Jones has the power at T2 to refrain from doing X. Consequently, we might read (1) either as laying down a necessary condition for Jones to have this power in any possible world, or as laying down a necessary condition for his having this power in the actual world.

The second interpretation is surely the correct one. Past circumstances in the actual world may help to determine what Jones can do in the actual world, but it would be absurd to suppose that they place any limitation on Jones' power in all possible worlds, even worlds in which those circumstances do not exist. To suppose that they do leads quickly to absurdities.

To see why this is so, just imagine the following sort of case. Suppose that in the actual world, Jones' right arm is amputated just prior to T2. Obviously, there is no relevantly similar world in which Jones claps his hands at T2. So, according to Pike's analysis, Jones does not have the power in the actual world to clap his hands at T2. But surely it does not follow that Jones does not have the power to clap his hands at T2 in a possible world in which his right arm is not amputated prior to T2.

On the second interpretation, (1) does not have these absurd implications. And if we adopt it, we can easily restate Pike's argument in such a way that it remains valid. All we have to do is to insert the phrase, "in the actual world," at the appropriate points in (1) and (5). (1) in particular would be rephrased as follows:

(1') If, in the actual world, Jones has the power at T2 to refrain from doing X, then there is a possible world having a history prior to T2 that is indistinguishable from that of the actual world, in which Jones refrains from doing X at T2.12

With Pike's claim thus rephrased, it is easy to see why Hoffman's second objection misses the mark. (1'), if true, is sufficient to support Pike's argument. But Hoffman's criticism is directed against the claim that the possession of any power at a time T logically entails the entire history of the actual world. In the language of possible worlds, this amounts to saying that every possible world in which a man possesses a power at a time T is a world with a history indistinguishable from that of the actual world prior to T. This would mean, for example, that every world in which I have the power to scratch my head or blow my nose is
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a world in which Plato existed and the Titanic sank.

(1'), on the other hand, is not a claim about every possible world. It is a claim about power in the actual world. If now, in the actual world, I have the power to refrain from scratching my head, (1') requires that there be at least one possible world indistinguishable from the actual world up to the present in which I refrain from scratching my head. Unlike the thesis that Hoffman refutes, (1') does not require us to say anything at all about what powers I do or do not have in worlds other than the actual one. As far as (1') is concerned, there may be a possible world in which I refrain from scratching my head even though Plato did not exist, and there may be no such world. It's just that the existence or nonexistence of such worlds is not relevant to the determination of what powers I have in the actual world.

Now I think we can give a more plausible reading of the passage (cited on page 2 above) that seems to have misled Hoffman. When Pike says that "what is within my power at a given moment determines a set of possible worlds," he is referring, not to the set of all possible worlds in which I have these powers, but rather to the smaller set of possible worlds that are relevant to determining what powers I have in the actual world. So when he goes on to say that all these worlds have histories indistinguishable from the history of the actual world prior to the given moment, he is neither asserting nor denying that I have powers in worlds whose histories differ from that of the actual world; he is merely specifying one of the criteria for membership in the set of worlds that determine what powers I have in the actual world at the time in question.

I think we can express Pike's claim about the relation between past circumstances and present powers more clearly without any reference to possible worlds. The idea is that the exercise of any present power must be logically compatible with every past circumstance. Applying this idea to the case of Jones, we have:

(1") If Jones has the power to refrain from doing X at T2, then his so refraining must not be logically incompatible with any circumstance that obtained prior to T2.

Suppose, to borrow Pike's original example, that Jones mows his lawn at T2, so that God believed at T1 that Jones would mow his lawn at T2. Since God is essentially omniscient, it follows that if Jones were to refrain from mowing his lawn he would be doing something that is logically incompatible with a circumstance that existed prior to T2. The question is: Can Jones refrain from mowing his lawn at T2? (1") gives us the answer Pike wants; Jones does not have the power at T2 to refrain from mowing his lawn.
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It should be clear, then, that (1") is the claim that Pike's argument needs. But (1") is not equivalent to the claim that Hoffman refutes. The proposition that I can do X only if every past circumstance is logically compatible with my doing X is not equivalent to the proposition that my ability to do X logically entails every past circumstance. The former may be true even though the latter is false.

Now I want to return to the first of Hoffman's two criticisms of Pike's thesis about power. Recall that, according to Hoffman, some present powers do not "entail that any contingent past circumstances did or did not obtain." If Hoffman were right about this, I think it is clear that Pike's thesis about power—even as interpreted by me—would be false. So let's take a closer look at Hoffman's argument for this claim.

Hoffman defends his claim that some powers don't "entail that any contingent past circumstance did or did not obtain" by giving just one example. My power to wink at a pretty girl at time T, he says, does not even entail that I existed prior to T. Apparently Hoffman thinks it follows from this that my power to wink at a pretty girl at time T does not entail that any contingent past circumstance did or did not obtain. But of course this does not follow. Even if my power to wink at a pretty girl at a time T does not entail that I existed prior to T, it may perfectly well entail lots of other things about the past. Indeed, I think it is clear that the possession of any power, including this one, does entail that certain contingent circumstances have not obtained in the past. My power to do X at a time T entails, for example, that it is not the case that one hundred years prior to T an essentially omniscient being believed I would not have this power at T. But whether or not it was the case one hundred years ago that an essentially omniscient being believed I would not have this power at T is a contingent fact about the past relative to T. So it follows that my power to do X at T does entail that a certain "contingent circumstance" did not obtain in the past—the very sort of contingent circumstance that matters to Pike's argument for the incompatibility of divine foreknowledge and human freedom.

Of course this doesn't suffice to show that Pike's thesis about power is true. For Pike's claim is not only that, if I have the power to do X at T, there must be no past circumstance that is logically incompatible with my having this power at T. Pike's thesis about power consists in the much stronger claim that if I have the power to do X at T, there must be no past circumstance that is logically incompatible with my actually doing X at T. The weaker claim is sufficient to undercut Hoffman's first objection. But to support his own argument concerning divine foreknowledge and human freedom, Pike needs the stronger claim.
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Whether or not that claim is correct is a difficult question that I do not pretend to have decided here. What I believe I have shown is only that Hoffman's objections to it are deeply mistaken.

FOOTNOTES


2. Ibid., p. 215.


4. Strictly speaking, Pike does not endorse the analysis of human power in terms of possible worlds. He claims merely to have shown what such an analysis would have to look like if one were possible at all.

5. Throughout the remainder of this paper, "possible world" will be used to mean "logically possible world."


7. Hoffman, op. cit., 441. Hoffman restricts his claim to contingent past circumstances because, as he points out in a footnote, it is trivially true that the possession of any power entails every necessary circumstance.


12. It would be easy to state a more general principle, laying down a parallel condition for Jones's power in any world. This may be done as follows:

(*) If, in a possible world \( \mathcal{W} \), Jones has the power at \( T_2 \) to refrain from doing \( X \), then there is a possible world, having a history prior to \( T_2 \) that is indistinguishable from that of \( \mathcal{W} \), in which Jones refrains from doing \( X \) at \( T_2 \).


14. I think this is pretty obvious. If not, just take another look at (1').
(1") If Jones has the power to refrain from doing X at T2, then his so refraining must not be logically incompatible with any circumstance that obtained prior to T2.

Since Pike claims to be giving a (partial) analysis of the concept of power, he is committed to the view that (1") is a conceptual truth. So I think the "must be" of (1") is a logical "must." Thus we can fairly represent Pike, in the language that Hoffman seems to prefer, as saying:

(**) Jones's having the power to refrain from doing X at T2 entails the nonoccurrence of any circumstances prior to T2 whose occurrence would be logically incompatible with his so refraining.

If Hoffman were right in saying that the possession of some powers does not entail the occurrence or nonoccurrence of any (contingent) past circumstance, then it would follow that (** is false, so that (1") would be false as well.

15. If this isn't perfectly clear, just consider the following. "An essentially omniscient being believed that I would not have the power to do X at T" entails "I don't have the power to do X at T." Whether or not I have the power to do X at T is a contingent matter of fact. If P entails Q, and if Q is contingent, then P must be contingent as well. Therefore, it is contingent whether or not an essentially omniscient being believed that I would not have the power to do X at T.