IS THE PAST UNPREVENTABLE?

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It has often been suspected that God’s alleged foreknowledge of all future events is incompatible with human free will. One argument which embodies this suspicion goes somewhat like this:

If God knows that I will do A, then surely I must do A.
God knows that tomorrow I will do A (whatever that may be).
Therefore, tomorrow I must do A.

And then one adds that since I must do A I have no freedom with respect to A, I cannot refrain from doing A, and so on. And since this argument can be repeated for each thing that I do, it follows that I have no freedom with respect to anything.

This line of argument, however, is ambiguous. On one interpretation its form is:

(1) Necessarily, if p then q.
(2) p
(3) Therefore, necessarily q.

This interpretation has the advantage that it makes the premises uncontroversial in their intended context. (2) follows directly from the assumption of God’s complete knowledge. And (1) follows from a stock analysis of the concept of knowledge.

Unfortunately, on this interpretation the argument commits a modal fallacy. It illicitly transfers the necessity of an entire hypothetical to its consequent. What actually does follow from (1) and (2) is not (3) but

(3’) q.

That is, from God’s knowledge that I will do A it follows that I will do A. But this conclusion is unmodalized, and does not entail that I have no freedom to refrain from A, etc.

On another interpretation the original argument has this form:

(4) If p, then necessarily q.
(5) p.
(6) Therefore, necessarily q.

And on this interpretation the argument is valid.
However, the first premise of this argument, (4), is not uncontroversial. It is not, like (1), derivable from the concept of knowledge. In fact, (4) seems largely to embody the very thesis which the argument was intended to establish. For (4) says, in effect, that whatever God knows is not only true but necessarily true. The argument on this interpretation, therefore, is unlikely to be useful in deciding whether foreknowledge is incompatible with freedom.

Jonathan Edwards, in his discussion of free will, puts forward an argument related to the one we have just discussed, but rather more subtle. The form of its kernel is:

(7) Necessarily, if \( p \) then \( q \).
(8) Necessarily \( p \).
(9) Therefore, necessarily \( q \).

This form is valid (what follows from necessary propositions is itself necessary). Premise (7), which is identical with (1), follows from the concept of knowledge. The crucial element in the argument is the premise represented by (8), which says, in effect, that whatever God foreknows He foreknows necessarily. Edwards discusses this at some length, and it will be the main topic of discussion in this paper.

Edwards' presentation of the argument is as follows:

It is very evident, with regard to a thing whose existence is infallibly and indissolubly connected with something which already hath or has had existence, the existence of that thing is necessary. Here may be noted:

1. I observed before, in explaining the nature of Necessity, that in things which are past, their past existence is now necessary: having already made sure of existence, it is too late for any possibility of alteration in that respect: it is now impossible that it should be otherwise than true, that that thing has existed.

2. If there be any such thing as a divine Foreknowledge of the volitions of free agents, that Foreknowledge, by the supposition, is a thing which already has, and long ago had, existence; and so, now its existence is necessary; it is now utterly impossible to be otherwise than that this Foreknowledge should be, or should have been.

3. It is also very manifest, that those things which are indissolubly connected with other things that are necessary, are themselves necessary. As that proposition whose truth is necessarily connected with another proposition, which is necessarily true, is itself necessarily true. To say otherwise, would be a contradiction: it would be in effect to say, that the connection was indissoluble, and yet was not so, but might be broken. If that, whose existence is indissolubly connected with something whose exis-
tence is now necessary, is itself not necessary, then it may possibly not exist, notwithstanding that indissoluble connection of its existence—Whether the absurdity be not glaring, let the reader judge.

4. It is no less evident, that if there be a full, certain and infallible Foreknowledge of the future existence of the volitions of moral agents, then there is a certain infallible and indissoluble connection between those events and that Foreknowledge; and that therefore, by the preceding observations, those events are necessary events; being infallibly and indissolubly connected with that, whose existence already is, and so is now necessary, and cannot but have been.¹

This line of argument was not new with Edwards, for St. Thomas cites it (as an objection),² and it may be much older than Thomas. Nor did it die with Edwards. In recent years it has been used by, for example, Arthur Prior, Nelson Pike, and Anthony Kenny.³ Not all of these people use it in the same way. Edwards, who believed that God knows the future, concluded that all events, including human volitions, are necessitated, and that therefore there is no free will (at least of the sort defended by his Arminian opponents). Prior, on the other hand, believing that the future is open and contingent in a way in which the past is not, reads the argument in the opposite direction. He concludes that there is much of the future which God does not know.

To see the way in which the argument goes, imagine that we take our stand at some point of time, t, from which we look forward to some possible event or state of affairs, E_p, which, if it transpires at all, will take place at some time yet future. And we also look back to some event, E_p, which has already occurred in the past. And now suppose that the past event is God’s foreknowledge of the future event.

Paragraph 2 of Edwards’ argument says that if God has foreknowledge, then His foreknowledge is already in the past. We might note that the argument requires that God’s foreknowledge precede not only the foreknown event; it must also precede any arbitrarily selected time. (Otherwise it would not show that future events are necessitated at every time.) And so if God has foreknowledge, then no matter when time t is and no matter when E_F is to occur, the foreknowledge (i.e., E_p) is already in the past.

Paragraph 4 says that there is a “certain, infallible and indissoluble connection” between E_p and E_F. Edwards evidently means to claim that the connection is such that E_p cannot fail to occur if E_F occurs.

Some theologians may argue that future events are necessitated because they are caused by an eternal act of God, or determined by God’s eternal decree. Edwards also may believe something of the sort, but it plays no role in his argument here. There is no mention of causation or any similar notion in the body of the argument, and Edwards explicitly denies that he relies on any claim that the foreknowledge
causes the foreknown event (p. 77). He goes further, in fact, and claims that his argument is compatible with the view that the causation runs the other way, the future event being the cause of the past foreknowledge (p. 78).

I think that the connection which Edwards means to cite here is one in logic. \( E_p \) is an epistemic state of affairs—it is the knowledge that \( E_F \) will occur. And it is not logically possible that \( E_p \) should occur and \( E_F \) fail to occur. I.e., it is not logically possible that (both) God foreknows that \( E_F \) will occur and yet \( E_F \) not occur. Edwards’ language here may suggest that he relies on the doctrine of God’s infallibility to generate this connection. Maybe he does, but it is unnecessary. The same result can be obtained from a stock analysis of the concept of knowledge. But if we prefer, like Nelson Pike, to recast the argument in terms of God’s fore-belief rather than His foreknowledge, then we will need something like the doctrine of divine infallibility in order to proceed.

It may also be worth noting that in fact the references to God’s knowledge or belief are not essential elements in this line of argument. For if at some past time it is merely true that \( E_F \) will occur in the future, then that past state of affairs will have an “infallible and indissoluble” connection with \( E_F \), and the argument can proceed just as before. It is not surprising, therefore, that someone like Prior, who rejects the divine foreknowledge because of considerations like this, also holds that many future-tense propositions have no truth values before the occurrence of the corresponding events.

The point of Edwards’ paragraph 3 is restated by Anthony Kenny as the familiar principle of modal logic to which I alluded earlier. “What is entailed by a necessary proposition is itself necessary.” Edwards speaks in this way too, along with (sometimes) the more metaphysical language which ascribes a necessity of existence to what is connected with something necessarily existent.

Edwards’ first paragraph ascribes necessity to what is in the past. In the formal mode of speech this is the claim that past-tense propositions, if they are true at all, are necessarily true. And it is clear that in Edwards’ thinking it is the pastness of past events which makes them necessary. They have, he says, already made sure of existence. It is now too late to alter them. And in an earlier discussion of necessity he said:

The connection of the subject and predicate of a proposition which affirms the existence of something, may be fixed and made certain, because the existence of that thing is already come to pass; and either now is, or has been; and so has as it were made sure of existence. And therefore, the proposition which affirms present and past existence of it, may by this means be made certain, and necessarily and unalterably true. The past event has fixed and decided the matter, as to its existence; and has made it impossible but that existence should be truly predicated of it. Thus the
existence of whatever is already come to pass, is now become necessary; it is become impossible it should be otherwise than true, that such a thing has been. (p. 11)

Thomas gives a very similar argument:

That this, namely, “This is known by God,” is absolutely necessary was proved as follows. This is something said about the past. But whatever is said about the past, if true, is necessary; for, since it has been, it cannot not have been. Therefore, it is absolutely necessary.5

The movement of the whole argument should now be clear enough. If God foreknows some future event, then His foreknowledge of it is already past. The foreknowledge entails the occurrence of the future event. But the foreknowledge, because it is in the past, is now necessary and fixed. So the future event is also necessary and fixed. Therefore, if God foreknows all future events, then all future events are necessary and fixed. And so, if God has foreknowledge, there is no contingency or freedom with respect to the future.

No doubt there are several ways in which one might try to discredit this argument. One theologically tempting way is to challenge paragraph 2, the claim that God’s foreknowledge is in the past. For many theologians have held that God is somehow outside of time entirely. And if that is so, then there is something suspect in assigning a temporal location to His foreknowledge of EF. This apparently was the way in which Thomas attempted to avoid the force of this argument. But I will not pursue it further here.

What about paragraph 3, the transitivity of necessity? Kenny says that this modal principle “seems undeniable.”6 But he also says that the necessity which attaches to the past is not logical necessity. But while this principle does indeed seem to hold for logical necessity, someone may doubt whether it holds for every sort of necessity. I myself, however, do not find that doubt very appealing here, and I will not pursue this line of criticism either.

That seems to leave us with paragraph 1 of Edwards’ presentation, the claim that the past has gone into the realm of necessity because of its pastness. Is that really true?

What type of necessity is it that is supposed to attach to God’s foreknowledge? It seems clear that in Edwards’ view it is the same as the necessity which attaches to everything which is past. For Edwards repeatedly asserts that the divine foreknowledge is necessary simply because it is already in the past. He does not suggest that God’s foreknowledge is in any way special in this regard. What, then, is the necessity which is thought to grip everything in the past?

Kenny says that it is not logical necessity. That seems correct. What then? According to Kenny, the “indeterminist” (that is, I suppose, the defender of free will)
believes that the past differs radically from the future in a crucial respect. He says, “The point that the indeterminist wishes to make is that we can bring about the future, but not bring about the past: our present activity may have an effect on what will happen, but cannot have an effect on what has happened.”

Edwards, I suppose, would not agree with Kenny’s indeterminist about the future, but he would agree with him about the past. The past is over and done with, and we cannot do anything about it now. This point, at first sight, may seem natural enough. Perhaps it is embedded in our folk wisdom, in the proverb, “Don’t cry over spilt milk.” Presumably there is a point in worrying over the milk which is not yet spilled, but not over the accident which is already past.

The proverb, however, is not itself entirely clear. Why should we not cry over the spilled milk? Is it because, the milk being already spilled, we cannot now change that fact—i.e., we cannot bring it about both that the milk has been spilled and that it has not? Or is it because, the milk being already spilled, we cannot now determine that fact—i.e., we cannot now either bring about or prevent the spilling of the milk? The distinction between these two claims seems, to me at least, to be of the greatest importance in thinking about this topic.

Consider first a case which involves the future rather than the past. The bathroom in my house now has a tiled floor. I could hire a contractor to take out that floor and install a carpeted floor in its place. By doing that I would determine a future state of the house. That is, I would bring it about that at a future time the house had a carpeted bathroom. I would also bring about a change in the house. I would cause the house to have at one time a property which it did not have at an earlier time—a carpeted bathroom rather than one that was tiled.

But now suppose instead that I engage a contractor to build a new house. He tells me that he usually installs a tiled bathroom, but I ask him to have it carpeted instead. He agrees, let us say, and that is how the house is built. Again, my decision and request would determine a future state of the house. I bring it about that the house, when it is built, has a carpeted bathroom. But, in contrast with the previous case, I do not change the house. There is no earlier time at which that house had a tiled bathroom, and so my decision, though it has an effect on the house, produces no alteration in the house. That is, as I said, a crucial distinction.

It is often said that we cannot change the past, that even God cannot change it. In one sense this is obviously false. The past is continually changing as new elements go into it, and many of these new elements are our doing. But that, no doubt, is not the sense intended here. When people speak of the impossibility of changing the past what they generally have in mind is this. To change the past would be to bring it about that at a certain time the past contained a certain event, and then at a later time did not contain it. If, for example, the past from 1943 to 1982 contained the Second World War, and then after 1982 no longer contained that tragic event, then the past would have changed in the way said to be impossible. To put it in the for-
mal mode of speech, a change in the past would involve a time at which it was true that \( E \) has occurred, and a later time at which it was not true that \( E \) has occurred.

I, at any rate, have no intention of denying this alleged impossibility. It seems to me to be quite correct. What is envisaged here is absolutely impossible, and neither God nor man can do it. And, for what it is worth, the future seems to me to be unchangeable in a thoroughly parallel way. That is, it is not possible that there be a time at which \( E \) will occur is true and an earlier time at which \( E \) will occur is not true. But the impossibility of changing the past in this sense is not relevant to the thesis we are considering here. For we need not be considering a case of changing the past, but rather one of determining or affecting the past. And that is a different matter.

Now, if we have a look at Kenny's statement again it seems clear that he does not ascribe to the indeterminist any view about whether the past can be changed. But he says that the indeterminist has an idea about whether we can bring about or affect the past. And his idea is that we cannot do that. In Edwards' own texts, unfortunately, the matter is not so clear. For he does speak there of the impossibility of an "alteration" in the past. And so perhaps Edwards, unlike the more cautious Kenny, really is thinking in terms of changing the past.

If so, however, his argument is irrelevant to the question of free-will. Presumably, whatever necessity pertains to the past will be transferred to the future via the "indissoluble connection." But if the only necessity which attaches to the past is that of unalterability, then that is the only sort of necessity which gets transferred in this way. The future, rigidly linked to an unalterable past, will be unalterable just like that past. (Of course, I have already suggested above that the future is unalterable just like the past, but independently of its connection with the past.) There is no reason, however, to suppose that the future inherits from the past any other sort of necessity.

The advocate of free-will, therefore, can admit that Edwards has established the unalterability of the future. But that need not trouble such an advocate, at least if he is not a totally implausible extremist. For the defender of free-will need not maintain that he can absurdly alter the future. No, it is quite sufficient for him to maintain that he can affect the future—that he can, by an exercise of free-will, determine what shape it shall have. (Not that the future already had another shape which now gets changed.) If by an act of free-will I can determine or bring it about that the future contains my travelling to Toronto next week, then I have, it would seem, whatever free-will any reasonable defender of that notion could wish.

If we interpret Edwards, then, in terms of unalterability, his argument is irrelevant to any natural construal of free-will. But if we interpret him along Kenny's lines, in terms of affecting and bringing about, then his argument is very relevant. And so that is the way I will interpret him here. In fact, Edwards' argument, given this interpretation, can be construed as a proof that the position Kenny ascribes to
the indeterminist is incompatible with God’s past knowledge of all future events. And, so far as I can see, that is correct. Those positions are indeed incompatible.

It does not follow directly from that, however, that an indeterminist need give up either his indeterminism or his belief in God’s foreknowledge. For Kenny ascribes to the indeterminist two beliefs, only one of which would seem to be essential to his position. He could therefore avoid inconsistency by giving up the other.

The defender of free-will, i.e., the indeterminist, presumably holds that there are some things—some marriages, say, some wars, and so on—which are determined (brought about, etc.) by free human decisions and choices. And consequently these things are not determined some other way—by the primeval arrangement of the atoms, say, or by a divine decree. That is what his indeterminism consists of. But it would not seem to be a part of indeterminism to hold a special view about the things which are fixed by an iron necessity which is impervious to human decision. In particular, the indeterminist (qua indeterminist) need not hold that the past is such a realm of necessity. A person, therefore, who wishes to combine indeterminism with a belief in God’s past foreknowledge of everything which is future would be well advised to reject this thesis about the past.

There can be, of course, and no doubt are, indeterminists who hold both of the views Kenny ascribes to them. They constitute a special kind of indeterminist. Let us call them “Kenny-indeterminists.” Perhaps they reject God’s foreknowledge, etc. But is their view even internally coherent?

On one interpretation it would seem not. If they hold that the past consists of events of a different sort from future events, the past events being of a sort which is impervious to human decision, etc., then there will be troubles. For all, or at least most, of what is in the past was once future, and all (or most) of what is in the future will one day be past. The past, just like the future, seems to be full of marriages, wars, journeys, etc., just the sort of things which are commonly supposed to be the proper subjects of free-will. If the past really did consist of things to which free-will did not apply, then it would be unlikely, to say the least, that there was any viable field for free-will in the future.

This, however, is presumably not what most Kenny-indeterminists have in mind. They do not think that past events are unavailable for being brought about, etc., simpliciter. No, it is that they are unavailable at a certain time, namely, when they are past. The thesis is therefore in part a claim about the temporal ordering of causes and effects. It says that the cause of a certain event or state of affairs cannot be anything which comes later in time than that event or state of affairs.

I say that this is “in part” the claim, because it may have to be put more generally. For there may well be some cases of bringing about a certain state of affairs, etc., which are not causal. If I shoot a man, for example, I perhaps bring about his death. That seems to be causal. But his death makes his wife a widow. And that link does not seem to be causal. Or at least there is a certain sort of causality which
it doesn't involve. Widowhood does not seem to be a "natural" status, like death or life. Nor would there seem to be a law of nature which links the death of a man to the widowing of his wife. So maybe this is a making or a bringing about which is not a case of causing. And we can think of many other examples. 9

If one holds, therefore, as a Kenny-indeterminist does, that we cannot bring about the past then his view may not be fairly represented as a view simply about causation. We should say that he holds that whatever brings about a certain event or state of affairs cannot be something which happens (or is done) later than that event or state of affairs. And presumably he would say the same thing about whatever prevents a certain state of affairs, etc. I will call this the K-I thesis. And, so far as I can see, the K-I thesis may well be coherent.

But is there any reason to suppose that it is true? Kenny provides no argument for it on behalf of his indeterminist. And neither, I think, does Edwards. Edwards discusses it at some length (at least on our present interpretation of him), but that discussion consists largely of repeating the thesis. Or so at least it seems to me. And so we may do as well, for the time being, to explore this question on our own. I will do so here largely in terms of the possible preventability of two events, the coronation of Elizabeth of England and the coronation of Prince Charles of England. And as I write this in 1983 one of these events is already past and the other, if it is to transpire at all, is still future.

I will argue that the past is not in general unpreventable. In conducting this argument I will sometimes talk as if Elizabeth's ascension to the throne is in fact preventable now in 1983. But that really is not my claim. I do not profess to know whether it is in fact preventable. What I argue, rather, is that if her queenship is not preventable, then that is not simply because of its pastness. Maybe something makes it unpreventable, but the mere fact that it is already past does not. I use Elizabeth's coronation, then, as a sort of stalking horse for the general K-I thesis, and for the corresponding Edwardian claim.

I must say, too, that when I suggest that Elizabeth's queenship may be preventable I do not mean any of the "sensible" interpretations which might, with some straining, be attached to my words. I do not mean, for example, that we might now prevent the continuation of Elizabeth's reign. Nor do I mean that we might now discover that a mistake had been made in the past—that her apparent coronation was invalid because of a technicality, say, so that she has never really been Queen. No, I mean that, assuming that she has been Queen for many years, we might now be able to do something which would bring it about that she has never, up to the present time, been Queen.

No doubt this claim appears to be paradoxical, absurd, contradictory, or something of the sort. Perhaps a good way to begin is to ask what can be said against it. There are I think, two main lines of argument which suggest themselves. One involves primarily a claim in logic, the claim that what I envisage involves some
contradiction. The other is a sort of empirical claim, that what I envisage is never in fact done. Both of these arguments involve interesting points. I will say something first about the empirical argument, and then discuss the objection from logic.

To the empirical argument, then. Someone issues the following challenge: "So you think the coronation of Elizabeth is still preventable? Very well, let's see you do it!" But I would not be eager to take up that challenge. Why not?

Consider first the analogous challenge. If the coronation of Charles (being future) is still preventable why don't I prevent it? But why should I? I have nothing against Charles, and I have no call to meddle in the monarchy of a country not my own. And in any case, if I say that the coronation of Charles is still preventable I need not mean that I can prevent it. Maybe I cannot. Maybe if I tried to do it the British police would get me. But it may still be preventable even if I cannot prevent it.

If one is challenged to prevent the coronation of Elizabeth one may initially respond in much the same way. Why should I prevent her coronation? I have nothing against her, and so on. But this is not likely to be conclusive. For it invites the objector to cast about for other cases. And he may say finally that if the past is really preventable then there ought to be some case in which I can do it and I would like to do it. But there seems to be no such case. I never demonstrate this power. Ergo,...

And my reply is that indeed there should be such cases, and there are. I routinely prevent past events every day.

But before we get to that, look at the Elizabeth case again. It is true that nothing which I have recently done has prevented the coronation of Elizabeth. And as I believe anyway, nothing that I will yet do will prevent it. But it is also true that nothing which I did prior to 1953 prevented Elizabeth's coronation. I have not prevented her coronation at all, either retroactively or pro-actively. In fact, no one in the whole history of the world has ever done anything which prevented the coronation of Elizabeth in 1953. And the same is true of every event which has ever occurred. None of them have been prevented after they occurred. But, equally well, none of them have been prevented before they occurred. None of them have been prevented at all.

So Elizabeth's coronation was not prevented pro-actively. What follows from that? In particular, does it follow that nothing could have been done in 1949 to prevent that coronation? Most of us, I think, are not much inclined to think so. (If it does follow, then it seems very doubtful that it is the pastness of her coronation which makes it unpreventable. For it was unpreventable while it was still future.) No, what follows from the fact that she actually was crowned is that nothing did prevent it, not that nothing could have done so.

Assume that we know that the death of Elizabeth prior to 1953 would conclusively have prevented her coronation, and also that we know that she was crowned
in 1953. From this we can conclude that she did not die prior to 1953. We do not need to make any further investigation to determine that fact. But we need not conclude that prior to 1953 Elizabeth was invulnerable to bullets, poisons, the plague, and so on. No, we can suppose her to have been subject to the ordinary human frailties. The fact is that she did not die, not that it was impossible for her to do so.

But if the fact of her coronation does not show her coronation to have been unpreventable before it occurred, why should it show it to be unpreventable after it occurred? In fact it does not. What follows from the fact that Elizabeth was crowned is that nothing will be done in 1983 to prevent that coronation. It does not follow that nothing could be done in 1983 (any more than in 1952) to prevent it.

The same reasoning would seem to apply to every event which has actually happened. Nothing which was done prior to those events prevented them from occurring. But that does not tend to show that nothing could have been done, prior to their occurrence, to prevent them. In the same way, nothing which was done after these events prevented them from occurring. But that does not tend to show that nothing could be done, after their occurrence, to prevent them.

Well, what we have found so far is that of the enormous number of events which have occurred in the past not a single one has been prevented, either pro-actively or retro-actively. Has nothing then ever been prevented, either in the past or in the future? Of course some things have been prevented, but so far we have looked for them in the wrong bag. For the past consists not only of the things which have happened, but also those which have not. That is, just as Elizabeth was crowned in 1953 is a past-tense fact so also is Charles was not assassinated in 1979. And it is in connection with facts of this latter sort that we may find some events which have been prevented.

I do not know whether anything prevented Charles’ assassination in 1979, much less what prevented it. But it does not seem impossible that something should have done so. Perhaps, for example, he would have been shot had it not been for an astute piece of detection by Scotland Yard. So let us suppose that something, some act, say, had the effect of preventing his assassination in 1979. And now, where must we suppose that this act is located, temporally? In particular, must we suppose that this preventing act occurred in 1979 or in some previous year? Or is it possible, on the other hand, that it occurred in 1980? This latter possibility is what I defend. It may very well be that something was done in 1980 which prevented Charles’ assassination in 1979.

Why, in fact, should anyone deny that possibility? Is it because we know what prevented that tragedy, and we know that the preventing act came early? Well, maybe someone does know that, although I don’t. But in any case, my thesis is general, not about Charles in particular. What reason do we have for denying in general that there can be cases in which the preventative effect of an act precedes that act?
Let us not be misled here by purely verbal arguments. Someone may claim that it is analytic that prevention must come before the thing prevented, perhaps calling our attention to the "pre" in "prevent". We need not quarrel over that. For my thesis can be put without using the word "prevent". I claim that perhaps something was done in 1980 whose effect was to bring about Charles' safety in 1979. But we can then, if we wish, define a new sense for "prevent" which expresses just that sort of claim, without any implication of temporal priority.

And what of someone who claims that it is part of the concept of cause (and effect) that causes cannot come later than their effects? I would suppose that claim to be a mistake. But it too seems to be a purely verbal objection. For presumably the concept of causation, even if it includes temporal priority, also includes something in addition to that. (Even on Hume's unusually impoverished account, the claim that X causes Y involves more than merely the fact that X precedes Y.) So the substance of my claim can be maintained even if the concept of causation includes temporal priority. For we can then define a new notion, Cause\textsubscript{m'}, which is defined as causation (in the alleged old sense) minus temporal priority. There must be something left after priority is subtracted, and that "something" is just what I mean to assert. When I say that a 1980 act might bring about Charles' safety in 1979 I mean that the relation there is \textit{just the same}, except for the temporal relation, as that between some other act and the subsequent safety it brings about. And that is a substantive claim which is independent of whether the ordinary concept of causality includes temporal precedence.

Perhaps, of course, someone will claim that the remaining elements in the concept of causation entail temporal priority. Well, maybe they do. But one would like to see some good argument for that claim. I have no reason to think there is any such good argument.

Now, where are we? We have seen that if we want examples of events which have been prevented then we should look for them among those events which have not happened. And there seem to be plenty of those. Prince Charles' assassination in 1979 is just one example. And perhaps it was something which was prevented from occurring. But if it was prevented then when does the preventing occur? I maintain that we have no reason, in general, for insisting that it must occur in 1979 or earlier. We do not, for example, seem able to derive that conclusion from an analysis of concepts such as prevention or causation. Is the temporal precedence of cause relative to effect supposed to be a synthetic \textit{a priori} truth? Maybe it is. It would be interesting to hear something in favor of this claim. Against it I can't think of anything to say except that I myself do not now find anything compelling in the claim about priority. Perhaps, then, it is an empirical discovery? That indeed seems to be the most promising approach. For, at least as it seems to me, most of what we learn about causes and effects is derived from observation of causes and effect.
Do we then know by observation that impending coronations and assassinations are always prevented, if they are prevented at all, by something which comes before the appointed time and never by anything which comes afterward? Well, maybe someone knows that, although I must say that I don’t. (And one might suspect that retro-active preventions are not routinely discovered because we hardly ever look for them.) But anyway, it’s not very important for the thesis I defend here.

Maybe the causes, preventions, etc. of coronations and assassinations are regularly, or even exclusively, temporally preceding events. That would be a special fact—maybe even an important fact—about such events and their causal relations. But the past also contains states of affairs—at least if Edwards is correct—which are much different from coronations and assassinations. If would be rash to extrapolate from the causal relation of one class of events to those of a much different class.

Before going into that, however, let us look at assassination, etc., again, this time in connection with the question of changing the past. Thus we return to questions of logic.

Imagine for the moment that someone had, in 1949, done something which prevented (permanently) the ascension of Elizabeth to the throne. This supposition seems to raise no logical difficulty. But would that act have altered the past? Well, it would have made the past (our past now) different from what it has in fact been. England would have had a different monarch (or maybe none at all) for the past 25 years, and so on. But perhaps this is not what people mean by changing the past. And in any case, it would not bring about a past which at one time included Elizabeth’s coronation and at a later time did not. No, if someone had performed that preventing act then he would simply have made our past one which includes no coronation for Elizabeth.

Now imagine that someone does something in 1980 whose effect is to prevent the assassination of Prince Charles in 1979. By hypothesis, this act makes the past different from what it would otherwise have been. For if it had not been done then Charles would have died in 1979. But it does not bring about the past’s at one time including Charles’ survival of 1979 and at some other time including Charles perishing in 1979. So it looks as though the supposition that something is retro-actively prevented does not involve the alteration of the past in any objectionable sense.

We have just considered two hypothetical cases—one was the possible pro-active prevention of an event which in fact took place, and the other was the possible retro-active prevention of an event which in fact did not take place. Each of these suppositions requires us to consider what we might call “counter-factual pasts.” That is, we have to think about what the past would have been like if something else had been done. Elizabeth would never have been queen, etc. But they have not
involved the alteration of the past in an objectionable sense. But what if we consider the retro-active prevention of an event which has already happened? Consider, for example, a 1960 act which would have prevented Elizabeth’s coronation in 1953. What would be the situation if that act had been performed? Here again the answer involves a counter-factual past. Had that act been performed then Elizabeth would not have been crowned in 1953. But we need envisage no alteration of the past.

Does it make a difference if the preventing act is still future as we consider it? No. If we imagine an act in 1985 which would prevent the 1953 coronation we get the same result. If it were to be performed the coronation would simply not have taken place. That is a counter-factual past, different from the actual past. But it involves no alteration of the past.

But the coronation has in fact already taken place. Certainly. And that entails that no coronation-preventing act will take place in 1985. It also entails that no coronation-preventing act took place in 1949. Neither of these entailments requires or involves any supposition that either of these acts would have absurdly altered that past.

And now, a last point about the coronation. The fact that the coronation has already taken place entails that no coronation-preventing act will take place in 1985. Does it entail that no such act is possible? And the answer to that is “No.” Or so it is, at least, so far as I can see. Of course, if Elizabeth’s coronation had any sort of necessity about it then the transitivity of necessity would transfer that necessity to whatever it entailed, even in the future. If Elizabeth’s coronation is now unpreventable, for example, then no coronation preventing act is now possible. But if we do not begin with the assumption that her coronation is now unpreventable we find no reason to believe that the preventative act is now impossible. We can, of course, be sure that it will not be done. But whatever is the reason why it will not be done, there need be nothing in it repugnant either to logic or to the proper order of reality, nor anything in it which exceeds human powers. Perhaps it will not be done simply because whoever is in a position to do it chooses not to do it.

As I said earlier, I have no thesis to defend here about coronations and assassinations in particular. Perhaps it is a fact that Elizabeth’s coronation is now unpreventable, and hence that no coronation-preventing act is now possible. But if Edwards’ suggestion is correct then the past may contain events or states of affairs which are much different from coronations and assassinations. For the past can also contain God’s foreknowledge of the future. And it is that particular sort of element in the past which I claim we can, and routinely do, prevent.

Suppose that I am now planning to travel to Toronto next week, and that if I do not change my mind, I will in fact go. Suppose, too, that I change my mind and follow out my new intention, staying home. By thus changing my mind I prevent God from foreknowing in the past that I will go to Toronto. I bring it about that He does
not foreknow, at any time in the past, that I will go. My choice thus makes the past different from what it would otherwise have been. But that does not mean that God at one time knew I would go to Toronto and later on came to know that I would not. Nor does it mean that at one time it is true that God knew that I would go to Toronto next week, and then at some later time it is true that God never knew that I would go to Toronto next week. No, by refraining from going I bring about (or prevent) something in the past, but I do not alter the past.

As before, if we wish to find the divine foreknowledge which I actually prevent, then we must look for it among the things which God has never foreknown. He has never foreknown, for example, that I would become a lawyer before the age of 40. Perhaps I prevented this foreknowledge by choosing to study philosophy rather than law. But what of the foreknowledge which God actually has—is that also preventable? Yes, some of it at least. His foreknowledge of the things I will freely do is preventable, though it will not be prevented. Perhaps he knows that I will choose to go to Europe in 1984. If he knows that then I will indeed go. But I could choose not to go. And if I did choose that, then I would prevent God from ever having foreknown that I would go. Here again we encounter the idea of counter-factual pasts, but not an alteration of the past.

Of course, if God’s foreknowledge had some necessity about it, then that necessity would be transferred to the foreknown event. But if we do not begin with the assumption that the event itself is necessitated we do not have any reason for supposing that the foreknowledge is necessary. And if the foreknowledge is not necessary then Edwards’ argument for the necessity of all events fails. Human volitions—and many other things as well—may have all the contingency and open-endedness which defenders of free will may wish to ascribe to them, despite the fact that they have always been infallibly foreknown by God.

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NOTES

1. Jonathan Edwards, A Careful and Strict Inquiry into the Modern Prevailing Notions of that Freedom of the Will which Is Supposed To Be Essential To Moral Agency, Virtue and Vice, Reward and Punishment, Praise and Blame, Part II, Sec. XII. The text here is taken from The Works of President Edwards (New York: Leavitt & Allen, 1852) Vol. II, pp. 73, 74. Further page references to this work are given in the text.


