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ON BEHALF OF THE PAP-ISTS: A REPLY TO BERGMANN

Thomas P. Flint

In his "Molinist Frankfurt-Style Counterexamples and the Free Will Defense," Michael Bergmann offers a clever and novel assault on the Principle of Alternate Possibilities (PAP), one that avoids most of the traps that have hobbled other Frankfurtians. Nevertheless, the counterexample he proposes is one where real questions can be raised concerning both the moral responsibility of the agent and the undetermined nature of his action. Furthermore, most agent-causationists would insist that the situation Bergmann envisions is ultimately incoherent. Hence, whether or not Bergmann is right to reject PAP, his argument offers us insufficient reason to do so.

Michael Bergmann's "Molinist Frankfurt-Style Counterexamples and the Free Will Defense" offers an ingenious argument for the claim that, even if we do not implicitly assume the falsity either of incompatibilism or of the theory of agency, there is a solid Frankfurtian counterexample to the Principle of Alternate Possibilities:

PAP. A person is morally responsible for performing a given act only if she could have acted otherwise.

Bergmann's assault on PAP is novel and clever, one which avoids most of the traps that have hobbled other Frankfurtians. What's more, his conclusion may well be correct; libertarian advocates of agent-causation may well be able to reject PAP. Nevertheless, I am not convinced that his argument can claim to have shown that this is the case.

Bergmann asks us to assume the admittedly controversial thesis that there are counterfactual truths akin to the counterfactuals of creaturely freedom that Molinists have famously defended in their discussions of middle knowledge.¹ His counterexample involves a situation in which the following counterfactual is true of a certain agent Jones:

A. If from t^* until t Jones were in circumstances K and Demon didn't take away Jones's powers at t with respect to $V1$ [a volition to pull the trigger of the gun in Jones's hand], then Jones would agent-cause $V1$ at t .

Assume that the antecedent of A is true and that the following conditional is also true:



C. If A were false, Demon would know it (long before t) and would take away Jones's powers at t with respect to V1.

Then, says Bergmann, Jones does agent-cause V1 and is morally responsible for so doing (since Demon does not in fact need to intervene). But consider the propositions

E. From t^* up until t Jones is in circumstances K

and

F. At t Jones exercises his power to do otherwise than cause V1 at t.

We can show, says Bergmann, that

13. If C, then *if E then $\sim F$*

is a necessary truth. Since both C and E would have been true no matter which of his powers Jones had exercised, it follows (via a type of transfer of powerlessness principle) that F would have been false no matter which of his powers Jones had exercised. So Jones can do nothing other than agent-cause V1. And since he is, as we already noted, morally responsible for agent-causing V1, it follows that Jones is morally responsible even though he couldn't have done otherwise. Hence, PAP is false.

Problems for Bergmann begin to surface when we consider more carefully the second conjunct of the antecedent of A—that is,

G. Demon didn't take away Jones's powers at t with respect to V1.

G, alas, is ambiguous. It can be taken either as

G1. Demon didn't take away *all of* Jones's powers at t with respect to V1.

or as

G2. Demon didn't take away *any of* Jones's powers at t with respect to V1.

Which reading does Bergmann intend? Well, G is supposed to be true in the counterexample Bergmann is constructing. But it's hard to see how G2 could be true in that situation. Demon, after all, has made C true, and the result (if Bergmann is right) is that Jones lacks the power to do anything other than cause V1, a power that presumably Jones would have had if Demon either were not on the scene or had not formed the intention that makes C true.² So it doesn't seem that G can be read as G2 if Bergmann's argument is to work.³

What happens if we take G as G1 rather than G2—i.e., if we assume that Bergmann's PAP-disconfirming situation is one in which Demon takes

away some but not all of Jones's powers? As we have seen, Demon does take away Jones's power to agent-cause anything other than V1. What other powers might Jones have relative to V1? Many agency theorists, I think, would say that he might have the power to do nothing with respect to V1 — the power to *not* agent-cause V1 or anything else in the neighborhood. The idea here is not that Jones *intentionally* refrains from agent-causing V1, for then one might reasonably say that he does agent-cause something (the relevant intention) after all. Rather, the picture here is of the sort of *non-intentional* refraining (if we can so call it) that goes on all the time. Five minutes ago, I refrained in this sense from throwing my telephone out the window. I had the power to defenestrate the phone, but I failed to exercise the power, not because I formed the intention not to exercise it, but because I did nothing whatsoever with respect to the phone. Can Demon leave Jones with this sort of power — the power to (non-intentionally) refrain from agent-causing V1?

Suppose Jones were left with this power. What would have happened if Jones were to exercise it? That is, if

R. Jones refrains from agent-causing V1 at t

were true, what would follow? Well, there's no reason to think that Jones wouldn't still be in circumstances K.⁴ And, of course, if Jones refrains from agent-causing V1 when in K, it's not the case that he would agent-cause V1 if in K. So it seems clear that

(i) $R \rightarrow \sim A$.⁵

Now, Jones could exercise his power to refrain only if Demon has not taken away that power. And if Demon didn't take away that power, then obviously he didn't take away all of Jones's powers. So

(ii) $R \rightarrow G1$

is also true. From (i) and (ii) it follows that

(iii) $R \rightarrow (\sim A \ \& \ G1)$.

Clearly,

(iv) $(\sim A \ \& \ G1) \Rightarrow \sim(\sim A \rightarrow \sim G1)$

is also true. From (iii) and (iv), it follows that

(v) $R \rightarrow \sim(\sim A \rightarrow \sim G1)$.⁶

Now, as Bergmann (correctly) notes, "the consequent of C entails the falsity of G". Since, as we've seen, G needs to be read as G1, the consequent of C entails the falsity of G1. And, given that the antecedent of C just is $\sim A$, it follows that

(vi) $C \Rightarrow (\sim A \rightarrow \sim G1)$.

Together, (v) and (vi) entail

(vii) $R \rightarrow \sim C$.

So, if Demon leaves Jones with the power to refrain from doing anything with respect to V1, then Jones has a power which, if exercised, would mean the falsity of C. But if Jones has a power the exercise of which counterfactually implies the falsity of C, then C *wouldn't* have been true no matter which of his powers Jones exercised. And thus the second part of Bergmann's argument in section 2.4 would crumble, for premise 16 would be demonstrably false.

So Bergmann cannot allow Demon to leave Jones the power even non-intentionally to refrain; Demon's behavior has to rob Jones even of this power. The situation that results from Demon's making C true has to be one in which Jones not only cannot agent-cause anything other than V1, but also cannot (non-intentionally) refrain from agent-causing V1. But if that is so, it seems to me that the counterexample is vulnerable on at least three related fronts.

First, Jones's moral responsibility for agent-causing V1 is much less clear that it first appeared. Following the typical Frankfurtian line, Bergmann asks us if Jones wouldn't clearly be responsible if there were no Demon; adding Demon to the situation is then supposed to make no moral difference since Demon never intervenes. But if there were no Demon, none of Jones's powers would have been snatched away from him. Why assume that the presence of that panoply of powers plays no role in our thinking that the Demon-less Jones is so obviously responsible? Bergmann employs the usual Frankfurtian misdirection when he says that, in the counterexample he describes, Jones acts "with absolutely no interference or influence from Demon." Even if we agree that Demon doesn't cause Jones to agent-cause V1, the fact that he's sealed off all other avenues — even that of non-intentionally refraining — makes nonsense of the claim that there has been *no* interference or influence. And while the degree of Demonic intervention here may not make it obvious that Jones is *not* responsible, it surely does call that responsibility into question.

In raising this first objection, we assumed that Demon doesn't cause Jones's act of causing V1. The second problem with Bergmann's counterexample is that this assumption seems questionable. Demon has set up a situation in which there's only one thing Jones can cause, and where he can't refrain from exercising his power to cause it. This surely seems like a situation in which Demon has caused Jones to exercise his power to agent-cause V1. And this even Bergmann would allow cannot be; his third condition of agent causation (AC in section 1.2) implies that nothing distinct from Jones could cause Jones to agent-cause anything. So Bergmann's counterexample may be incoherent even on his own account of agent-causation.

The third problem for Bergmann is that, whatever the implications of *his* notion of agent-causation on his counterexample, the situation he envisions is one which is clearly incoherent on the picture of agent-causation that is, I

suspect, most widely embraced. On that picture, one that the *paterfamilias* of agency theory himself, Thomas Reid, clearly promoted, it simply makes no sense to say that a person has the power to cause something but not the power not to cause it. As we have seen, Bergmann's counterexample requires that Demon leave Jones with the power to cause V1, but not with the power to refrain from causing it. And that, Reid and company would insist, is simply impossible: "Power to produce any effect, implies power not to produce it."⁷

Despite its many virtues, then, Bergmann's attack on PAP seems seriously deficient. Whether or not that means that PAP itself, or at least something very much like PAP, should be embraced by the agent-causationist libertarian is, of course, another matter.⁸ If there are cogent reasons to abandon or modify PAP, though, agent-causationists are not likely to find them in Bergmann's argument.⁹

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NOTES

1. As Bergmann is aware, the conditionals he employs in his argument are distinct from those that Molinists have defended. Counterfactuals of creaturely freedom have antecedents that are complete (i.e., that include all the "hard facts" over which the agent in question has no control) and consequents that state how the agent in question would freely act. Bergmann's subjunctive conditionals of agent causation make no claim to have complete antecedents and make no assumption concerning the freedom of the acts of agent-causation mentioned in their consequents.

2. I am assuming that C's truth is dependent upon Demon's actions. This surely seems to be implied by Bergmann's contention (in defense of his Premise 16) that Jones could have no power over C because its truth is grounded in "the firmness of Demon's plan. . . . Demon is committed to acting in accord with C." Demon's actions (his making plans and commitments), then, have resulted in the truth of C. Indeed, it seems clear that Bergmann should also maintain that C's truth is the consequence of Demon's *undetermined* actions. For suppose that the causal history of the world (H) and the laws of nature (L) at the time of Demon's planning together entailed Demon's action, and thus entailed C. Assuming the soundness of Bergmann's argument that C entails $(E \supset \sim F)$, it would then follow that $(H \& L)$ entails $(E \supset \sim F)$. And from this it would follow that $(H \& L \& E)$ entails $\sim F$. But it's hard to see how Jones's act of agent-causing V1 could be seen as anything other than causally determined if this final entailment held. And, of course, even given Bergmann's account of agent causation (AC in section 1.2), it's simply impossible for an event to be *both* agent-caused and causally determined. So, if Bergmann is to avoid such problems, he'd best insist that the act of Demon's upon which C depends *not* be a causally determined act.

3. G2 would be, for Bergmann, an unfriendly reading of G for a slightly more technical reason as well: it renders the first part of his argument in section 2.4 invalid. That argument requires that G be entailed by F. But G2 doesn't follow from F. What F entails is that Demon didn't take away Jones's power to do otherwise than cause V1; it doesn't entail that Demon left Jones with the power to cause V1. So, though F does entail G1, it doesn't entail G2.

If G were read as G2, then, the argument would collapse.

4. If one thought that circumstances K *wouldn't* still obtain if Jones were to exercise his power to refrain from agent-causing V1, one would be doing Bergmann no favors, for then the second part of his argument in section 2.4 would dissolve, since 19 would no longer hold.

5. Here and throughout, I use the single-line arrow (\rightarrow) to represent counterfactual implication and the double-line arrow (\Rightarrow) to represent strict implication (i.e., entailment).

6. The principle that warrants the move from (iii) and (iv) to (v) could be stated as, "If $(X \rightarrow Y)$ and $(Y \Rightarrow Z)$, then $(X \rightarrow Z)$ ".

7. From the 1983 printing by Georg Olms Verlag of *The Works of Thomas Reid*, 8th ed., ed. by William Hamilton (Edinburgh, 1895), p. 523. Quoted in William Rowe, "The Metaphysics of Freedom: Reid's Theory of Agent Causation," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 74 (2000), p. 445.

8. For what it's worth, I must confess that I am not myself a confirmed PAP-ist; my suspicion is that PAP isn't quite what the agent-causationist needs. Even a Reidean agent-causationist, I think, could grant the possibility of a situation where the only options Demon leaves open for Jones are agent-causing V1 or refraining from causing anything. If Jones were in that case to agent-cause V1, he would seem to be morally responsible. But he could not have *done* anything else. His only alternative was to (non-intentionally) refrain, and such a *refraining* is not a *doing*. Even if PAP is discredited by such examples, though, it seems clear that it has close relatives that would prove more resilient — e.g., something along the lines of

PAP* A person is morally responsible for performing a given act only if she could have (non-intentionally) refrained from performing it

or perhaps

PAP** A person is morally responsible for agent-causing X only if she could have (non-intentionally) refrained from agent-causing X.

9. I wish to thank Stewart Goetz for his helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.