Acting and the Open Future: 
A Brief Rejoinder to David Hunt


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I have argued that since (i) intentional agency requires intention-acquisition, (ii) intention-acquisition implies a sense of an open future, and (iii) a sense of an open future is incompatible with complete foreknowledge, then (iv) no agent can be omniscient. Alternatively, an omniscient being is omnipotent.¹ David Hunt continues to oppose this reasoning, most recently, in Religious Studies 32 (March 1996). It is increasingly clear that the debate turns on larger issues concerning necessity and knowledge, but let me here offer a few comments in defense of my position.

Hunt identifies what he labels three "key moves" in my argument:

(3) X's A-ing at t' is a case of (intentional) agency only if there is a time t such that X acquires at t an intention to A at t'.

(4) X acquires at t an intention to A at t' only if X's A-ing at t' is regarded by X at t as an open alternative for him.

(5) X's A-ing at t' is regarded by X at t as an open alternative for him only if X is ignorant at t whether or not he will A at t'.

His quarrel is with (3) and (5). However, I accept neither principle. The falsity of (3) is evident each time we fail to intend the envisioned means or consequences of actions that we intend, even though these means or consequences may themselves be actions we perform intentionally. For example, I might intentionally walk through the hallway in carrying out a previous intention to go to the kitchen without acquiring the distinct intention to walk through the hallway.² My argument on page 60 of my 1994 article requires only the more general principle,

(3a) If X intentionally As at t' then at some time t not later than t', X acquired an intention to do some action or other.

Despite this qualification, what Hunt says in criticizing (3) is relevant to my argument. He makes two points. The first is that in describing intending as a state of "settling" the mind I confuse intending with deciding. It is deciding which settles the mind, and to be in an intending state is not necessarily to be in a deciding state. For this reason, concludes Hunt, "there is no conceptual connection between intention-possession and intention-acquisition." ³ This inference is hasty. The mere distinction between intending and deciding--more generally, between intending and coming to intend--does not refute the claims that to act intentionally is to have previously acquired some intention or other, and that to "acquire" an intention implies that one's mind was not previously settled upon so intending.
Hunt's second worry concerning (3) is more substantial. I argued that specific intentions—those concerning particulars—must be acquired because they involve information that comes through causal interaction with particulars and, hence, cannot be innate. Hunt thinks my defense equivocates on 'acquire', a term which can mean either to come to have or to be dependent upon. While an omniscient being could not "acquire" specific information in the first sense it could in the second, and it has not been shown that specific information must be acquired in the first sense. Indeed, God himself is "the perfect counterexample."

I did not equivocate; I used 'acquire' consistently to mean come to have. In disputing the scope of my (3a), Hunt opens up a long-standing theological debate over divine knowledge of particulars facts, objects, places, times, and events. God might indeed be the counterexample to my claim, I cannot say. What I do know is that as agents we must have a grasp of particulars—if only ourselves—in order to act intentionally. Past experience and our own planning suffice for most of our anticipations of future particulars, but the information needed to activate or execute our plans is the sort we typically express with indexicals like 'now', 'here', 'this', and 'there'. For example, I act upon my intention to turn on my radio at 7 am only when I realize that this is my radio, that it is now 7 am, and so on. Such indexical information is tied to the agent's unique spatio-temporal perspective and cannot be possessed until that perspective is assumed. It is doubtful, therefore, that indexically-specified information can be had in advance of an immediate experiential encounter, or that it can be innate or eternal in either the omni-temporal or the trans-temporal sense.

Admittedly, the issues are complicated, but even if we allow that an omniscient being does not acquire any specific information it does not follow that it can have a sense of an open future. If Hunt is correct in thinking that an omniscient being can be in possession of specific information eternally, it remains to show that such a being is an agent. My other considerations about the sense of openness still apply.

Hunt makes two substantial criticisms concerning (5). In the first, he supposes that a man might anticipate what he will do intentionally without yet intending to do it. For example, he might have discovered a "book of life" predicting his own suicide at a future time and, based upon his experiences with the book's reliability, come to justifiably believe that he will commit suicide then without yet intending to do so. Hence, foreknowledge does not preclude subsequent intention-acquisition.

It is unclear to me whether Hunt is attacking (5) or (4) or some other principle with this example, though taking his words at face value, his target is (5). However, (5) is unacceptable; a person can view a course of action as open despite knowing or believing that he will do it (or, refrain). He might simply overlook or forget what he knows or believes. Instead, the critical psychological claim on page 64 of my 1994 article is what I called the "Presumption of Uncertainty," namely,

\[(5^*)\text{If, at } t, \text{ a rational being } X \text{ presumes that his intending to } A \text{ at } t' \text{ is contingent relative to what he himself then believes, then at } t, X \text{ presumes both that he does not yet believe that he will intend to } A \text{ at } t' \text{ and that he does not yet believe}\]
that he will not intend to A at t'.

This principle, I claimed, expresses the peculiar sort of ignorance, uncertainty, or non-commitment involved in the sense of contingency that, in turn, is constitutive of the agent's presumption of openness. When combined with other principles I endorse, it yields the following:

\[(5a) \text{At } t \text{ X regards A-ing at } t' \text{ as open only if at } t \text{ X presumes that he does not yet believe that he will A intentionally at } t'.\]

The presumptions posited in the consequents of (5*) and (5a) will be mistaken if one overlooks one's commitments, but only if overlooking is a kind of "ignorance" does (5) come close to being an appropriate principle, and then only if one can simultaneously know the very thing one is ignorant of.

The relevant question is whether the book of life case refutes either (5*) or (5a). Hunt is correct that a belief that one will do A does not guarantee practical commitment to doing A, but (5*) or (5a) fail only if we can find an agent who views an action as open but does not satisfy the consequent of either conditional. Nothing in Hunt's description secures this. For all we know, the agent forgot about the book of life prediction and subsequently acquired the intention to commit suicide via the usual painful route. But suppose that during the interval dating from the time the agent came to believe that he would commit suicide to the time he actually did it he always believed firmly that he would commit suicide at the appointed time and never overlooked this belief. Then it is doubtful that he ever acquired the intention to commit suicide at the predicted time, though when he committed suicide he did so intentionally. As the hallway case illustrates, one can do something intentionally without acquiring the intention to do it. If any intentional activity takes place here at all then at some point the agent acquired some intention to do something else, say, to pull the trigger now, which he regarded both as an open alternative and as likely to result in the desired suicide.

The crux of the matter is whether (4) is acceptable. Hunt does not challenge it, and if intention requires a presumption of openness then what does it latter amount to? The very use of the adjective 'open' in (4) suggests something partial, incomplete, waiting to be filled in. Hunt does not dispute the claim that a necessary condition of one's sense of an open future is a recognition that certain future-tensed propositions are as yet contingent. What sort of contingency is at stake? It is not enough that considered actions be recognized as logically or nomologically contingent. What is needed is that they be recognized as contingent given prevailing circumstances or things as they now stand. But what do 'prevailing circumstances' or 'things as they now stand' express within attitudinal scope? Minimally, they represent the agent's self-represented conception of relevant past and present facts, a conception that is likely to omit a good deal that is true while including some false suppositions. If so, then at the very least, one's presumption that a given course of action is contingent is made relative to what one takes to be the case.

On this view, to assume that a course of action is yet open for one is at once an acknowledgement that one's conception of the future is not complete, thus, that both performing
the action and omitting it are still possible as far as one can tell. These words indicate a realization of one's own uncertainty about what one will do. Consequently, to have a sense of an open future is to recognize that one's cognitive grasp of the future is limited.

If (4) is retained, the only way to explain how an omniscient being can have a sense of the openness of its own future actions is to allow that there are future-tensed propositions that are absolutely contingent, that is, implied by no set of propositions that are presently true. Nothing I have said rules out this option. My only misgiving with it, besides its substantial indeterminism, is that it strains my comprehension to call a being "omniscient" when it can entertain a so-called future contingent of the form I will A at t' yet not know whether the proposition I perform A at t' will become true or will become part of its future knowledge. Maybe such a being knows everything there is to know, but it does not know everything that can be thought, not even about itself.

So much for Hunt's first criticism of (5), or, of (5*) and (5a). His second criticism is that viewing a course of action as a consequence of one's beliefs does not automatically confer a type of necessity or unavoidability upon that course of action, not unless we endorse a variant of what he calls "Sleigh's Fallacy" whereby one reasons from P and □(P → Q) to □Q. While he contends that so-called "hard facts" about the past are unavoidable and confer unavoidability upon their consequents, the same is not true of "soft facts." Though they necessitate God's future actions, facts about what God knew or believed in the past are soft.

I view the distinction between "hard facts" and "soft facts" with suspicion for the simple reason that every fact affects the future and, hence, is "dependent" upon it for its identity, even if its effects are cashed out in terms of probability distributions. What is curious about Hunt's response is that he apparently thinks that an omniscient being could regard its future A-ing at t' as open, even deliberate about it, and yet believe all along that it will do A at t'. This strikes me as incredible given the description of practical thinking and the presumption of openness I have articulated. Hunt says nothing to make his suggestion acceptable since he does not provide an alternative account of the sense of openness. I suspect that his real quarrel is with (4), but then he must come up with a theory of intentions to support that denial.

Maybe an omniscient being, a supreme being, a god, is an exemption to these principles regarding agency. Perhaps it can view an act as open even though it has always known it will do it, or, perhaps it can act without a sense of openness. I do not know. I offer the principles in characterizing intentional agency as I experience it. If these principles are inaccurate, counterexamples are invited. If they are alleged not to apply to a special class of beings, then we deserve an explanation of the nature of these beings and some motivation for regarding them as agents. Otherwise I can only recall Whitehead's sound advice that God should not be viewed as an exemption to metaphysical principles, but as their "chief exemplification."

Finally, Hunt thinks my reasoning is fatalistic. He has a broad sense of "fatalism" whereby any future-tensed proposition that is necessary in any sense is fated. However, my argument does not commit me to the doctrine that all future-tensed propositions are presently fated, though I acknowledge that a kind of fatalism would be true if an omniscient being exists. This disturbs Hunt who feels that one commits an "egregious" fallacy upon reasoning from P and □(P → Q)
to $\Box Q$. Fallacious? The reasoning is central to the doctrine of relative modality according to which a consequence of a set of propositions itself possesses a certain sort of necessity, a necessity relative to that set and, thus, distinct from the necessity of the consequence relation. The doctrine cannot be dismissed lightly. The everyday cans, cannots, mights, and maybes we use in planning, predicting, and ruminating about the past express some such relative modality, for example, those of the negligent student who concludes in his eigth semester that he cannot graduate at the end of his fourth year because of his past failure to meet all the distribution requirements. If this 'cannot' expresses necessity then there is more than meets the eye in the inference from $P$ and $\Box (P \rightarrow Q)$ to $\Box Q$, and it takes more than expressions of bewilderment to undermine it.

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NOTES


ii. For a defense of the view that not every intentional action is itself intended, see A. Mele, *Springs of Action* (Oxford, 1992), as well as my "Intentions and Self-Referential Content," *Philosophical Papers* 24 (1995), 151-166.

iii. In several writings, Hector-Neri Castañeda argued that the immediate volitions which trigger actions are indexical in form. See, for example, *Thinking and Doing* (Reidel, 1975), chapter 12; *Thinking, Language & Experience* (Minnesota, 1989), chapter 7; and *Intentionality, Modality, and Supervenience* (Rotterdamse Filosofische Studies XII, 1990), chapter 3. Alfred Mele argues for a similar position in *Springs of Action* (Oxford, 1992).

iv. Indexical reference is *experiential* reference (Castañeda, *Thinking, Language & Experience*, chapter 4), the kind that is derivative upon immediate awareness with various items. Whatever I express with 'this,' whether a physical object, a sense-datum, an event, an illusion, or, simply, a representation, it remains that I am presently aware of that item. When I refer to someone as 'you' or 'she' (demonstrative), I must be presently aware of those persons.
