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SUPERBEING AS BIOGRAPHER

JAMES ROSENTHAL

Pierre-Simon Laplace envisioned a “superbeing” which would know everything there is to be known: it would be aware of every object and phenomenon in existence and all the laws by which these objects and phenomena operate and relate. In a world in which causal determinism were true, this superbeing would be aware of every cause present in the world and every result that will undoubtedly arise from these causes. In other words, it would have a complete knowledge of the past, which is all that is needed for a complete knowledge of the future. This would not be true for only natural (that is to say, non-human) phenomena. If determinism is true and every human action is the unique result of very definite causes, this superbeing, possessing knowledge of the causes behind human actions, would be able to flawlessly predict every future human action as well (Laplace, 4; Schick, 133).

Suppose this superbeing wrote a book detailing every action committed by one person through the course of his life—something, it would seem, that the superbeing would be very capable of doing. If the subject of the book somehow came in possession of it and read it, one wonders if he would be able to do anything other than what was written in it. It is hard to imagine the book stating that he will scratch his head and him, to his amazement, finding his arm rising up and his fingers, against his wishes, scratching the top of his scalp, no matter how hard he tried not to—as if determinism were some mystical force causing a predetermined set of actions to occur, regardless of whatever else happens. So one might argue that the subject of the book has ‘free will’ in the sense that his actions

are not predictable and, at any moment of his life, there are several real possibilities for what might occur.

This contradicts the view of determinism that there are not several possibilities for the future, but only one, the inevitable result of every cause that preceded it. However, there is something wrong with this initial situation. Suppose that you are instructed to write down whether you think a particular person will perform act A or act B. But you know that he will read what you write and do the opposite. If you write that he will perform act A, he will perform act B; if you write that he will perform act B, he will perform act A. You may first think to write down A but then realize that, upon reading this, the person will do B. So you change what you write to B, but realize that he will then do A. Most likely, you will very soon realize that you can't write anything at all and therefore won't attempt to.

It is doubtful that Laplace's superbeing would come to this conclusion any less easily. If it knows everything, it will know that its book would be read. If the subject of the book would be inclined to do other than what is written, the superbeing would know this as well. Therefore, when it sat down to write the book, it would know that such a task is impossible. In fact, it would never sit down to write it in the first place. One then might wonder if it is not always possible, even with all the knowledge of the superbeing, to predict the future, which would mean that determinism is false. But the superbeing is not incapable of predicting the future, only of sharing it with anyone. The superbeing could accurately predict that it would not write the book, or write it and not share it with anyone, and then the superbeing could accurately predict what the would-be subject of the book would do, never having read or even been aware of such a book. Thus, ultimately, this situation is not a valid argument against determinism or the logic of Laplace's superbeing.