Peter Van Inwagen, “An Argument for Incompatibilism”

I. Preliminaries (35-48)

Note: All of the discussion in this part of the essay concerns clarifying key terms and concepts that will be utilized in Van Inwagen’s argument and much of this discussion can be very technical and of only marginal importance in understanding the argument itself. In a couple of cases, I draw attention to some aspects of the discussion we don’t need to worry about. But, with all of this, coming away with a very basic understanding of the points mentioned in the outline below should be sufficient for dealing with his argument.

A. What is the “Consequence Argument”? (39) This is the most basic version of the argument. He will break it down more precisely later in the essay.

B. What is a Proposition? (39-40)

Note: Don’t worry about the discussion of possible worlds too much. It is simply a way of talking (an idiom, if you will) that many philosophers believe can be helpful in clarifying some concepts. For our purposes, it is sufficient if we understand that a proposition is the thought expressed in a sentence that can be true or false. We distinguish propositions from sentences because the same proposition can be expressed in different sentences. For example, the English sentence, “Snow is white,” expresses the same proposition as the German sentence, “Schnee ist weiss.”

C. What is a state? (40-41)

D. What is a law of nature? (41-45)

E. What is determinism? (45-46)

F. (46-47) It’s important for Van Inwagen to speak of our ability to render (or not) propositions false. This is an important point and you should try to understand his discussion through the top of p. 47. But the rest of his discussion (47-48) is not terribly important for what we’ll be doing with the argument, so you can ignore it.

II. The Consequence Argument (48-57)

A. The Argument and Commentary on Premises of the Argument (48-54) Be as clear as possible about the meaning of each premise and how Van Inwagen proposes the conclusion follows from the premises.

B. Why does Van Inwagen think recasting the consequence argument into an argument concerning his inability to visit Arcturus a half hour ago strengthen his case? (54-57) If it took working a “miracle” (57) for Van Inwagen to visit Arcturus a half hour ago, would it also take a miracle for the judge to raise his hand (assuming determinism is true)?