

## FATALISM

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Philosophical fatalism is the view that

(F) whatever happens is, and always was unavoidable.

Unlike the hard-determinist, the philosophical fatalist does not base this belief on the tenet of causal determinism. What he claims is rather that the truth of (F) can be established by taking account of our most intuitive assumptions concerning such notions as truth, past, future, and power. In this paper, I wish to examine one main argument for philosophical fatalism. I shall try to show that this argument is not sound, but rests on an incorrect application of the principle of the unalterability of the past.

The particular fatalistic argument I have in mind may be formulated as follows:

(FA) Suppose that at a certain moment, say  $t_{10}$ , John raises his arm. It was therefore true at  $t_0$  that John would raise his arm at  $t_{10}$ . Indeed, it was true from all eternity that John would raise his arm at  $t_{10}$ . But if it was true from all eternity that John would raise his arm at  $t_{10}$ , it was not within his power before  $t_{10}$  not to do so. To suppose otherwise would be to suggest that that John had it within his power to alter the past. <sup>(1)</sup>

That is, the fatalist argues that by attributing to John, say at  $t_9$ , the power not to raise his arm at  $t_{10}$ , one is committed to holding that at  $t_9$ , John had it within his power to bring it about that it was not true at  $t_0$

<sup>(1)</sup> An ancient version of this argument, may be found in Peter de Rivo, cited in L. BAUDRY, *La Querelle des Futurs Contingents* (Paris, 1950), pp. 80-81. For its recent versions, see G. RYLE, *Dilemmas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1954), p. 15, and S. CAHN, *Fate, Logic and Time* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967), pp. 38-39, 82-83.

that he will raise his arm at  $t_{10}$ . And this, the fatalist claims, is to have power over the past. <sup>(2)</sup>

This argument for philosophical fatalism has been dealt with by philosophers in various ways. Some of them have tried to block it by contending that tensed ascriptions of truth such as

(X1) it is true at  $t_0$  that John will raise his arm at  $t_{10}$

do not make sense. <sup>(3)</sup> Others have suggested that we give up the law of bivalence for future-tensed statements, arguing that such statements are neither true nor false. <sup>(4)</sup> Still others, have questioned the assumption that "it will be the case that p" entails "it was always the case that it will be the case that p". <sup>(5)</sup> In my opinion, all these lines of response to (FA) are unconvincing. The complaint according to which a locution such as (X1) is improper is simply unfounded. This locution can be explicated quite unproblematically in the following way:

(X1') if someone uttered at  $t_0$  a token of the sentence-type "John will raise his arm at  $t_{10}$ ", he would be speaking truly. <sup>(6)</sup>

The trouble with the other two responses to (FA) is that they provide what one may call "only a formal solution" to the problem posed by (FA). I say "only a formal solution", because their proponents, while urging us to reject some of the basic assumptions upon which (FA) is based, leave us in the dark as to what precisely is wrong with them, except being part

<sup>(2)</sup> The intuitive principle underlying this inference is this:

(p)  $[\sim\beta \cdot \Box(\alpha \supset \beta) \cdot P_{a,t}^*(\alpha)] \supset P_{a,t}^*(\beta)$ , where " $\alpha$ " and " $\beta$ " range over contingent states of affairs, " $\Box$ " denotes broadly logical necessity, and " $P_{a,t}^*$ " is short for "it is within a's power to bring it about".

A similar principle has been suggested to me by Carl Ginet.

<sup>(3)</sup> See for example, F. WAISMANN, "How I See Philosophy" in *Contemporary British Philosophy*, third series, ed., H.D. Lewis (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1956), p. 457, and A.J. Ayer "Fatalism" in *The Concept of a Person* (London: Macmillan, 1963), p. 237.

<sup>(4)</sup> J. LUKASIEWICZ, "Philosophische Bemerkungen zu mehrwertigen Systemen des Aussagenkalkuls", *Comptes Rendus de Seances de la Societe des Sciences et des Lettres de Varsovie*, Classe III, vol. XXIII (1930), Fascicule 1-3, pp. 51-77. See also G. Ryle, *Dilemmas* op. cit., p. 20.

<sup>(5)</sup> A.N. PRIOR, *Time and Modality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1957), pp. 94-96. See also his *Past, Present and Future* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), pp. 128-134.

<sup>(6)</sup> Cf. Storrs MC CALL, "Temporal Flux", *American Philosophical Quarterly* 3 (1966), pp. 270-281.

of a piece of reasoning which leads to a paradoxical conclusion. Regardless of the previous point, it seems to me that adopting any of these moves merely for the sake of blocking (FA) is to concede too much to the fatalist.

To see exactly what is wrong with (FA), let us examine more closely an assumption crucially featuring in it, which is the principle of the unalterability of the past

(PST) If an object  $x$  exemplifies a certain property  $F$  at a given time  $t$ , then it is not within anyone's power at a time later than  $t$  to bring it about that  $x$  did not exemplify  $F$  at  $t$ ,

or more formally put

$$(x)(F)(t)(t')(a)[(F(x,t) \cdot t' > t \supset \sim P_{a,t'}^*(\sim F(x,t)))]$$

(where " $x$ ", " $F$ ", " $t$ ", and " $a$ " range respectively over objects, properties, times, and persons, and " $P_{a,t'}^*$ " is short for "it is within  $a$ 's power at  $t'$  to bring it about that").

For this purpose let us draw a distinction between two sorts of properties an object  $x$  may have at a given time  $t$ :

- (i) a property  $x$  may have at  $t$  *in virtue of* some object  $y$  exemplifying some other property at a time later than  $t$ , i.e., a property of  $x$  which is defined in such a way that one of the conditions for  $x$  exemplifying that property at  $t$ , obtains at a time later than  $t$ . Call such a property "a future contingent property of  $x$ , relative to  $t$ ".
- (ii) a property  $x$  may have at  $t$ , which it does not have in virtue of some object  $y$  exemplifying some other property at a time later than  $t$ .

Suppose that Smith who lives in New York at  $t_0$ , expresses at  $t_0$  the belief that his friend John will visit him at  $t_{10}$ , and let us suppose that John indeed does so. Then the following count as future contingent properties of Smith relative to  $t_0$ :

F1: correctly believing that John will visit New York at  $t_{10}$

F2: uttering the true sentence "John will visit New York at  $t_{10}$ ".

On the other hand, properties such as

F3: living in New York

F4: being a friend of John

would belong to properties of the second sort.

Roughly speaking, we may say that  $F$  is a future contingent property of an object  $x$ , relative to a time  $t$ , *if*

(1)  $x$  has  $F$  at  $t$

(2)  $\Box[F(x,t) \supset (\exists G)(\exists y)(\exists t')(t' > t \cdot G(y,t'))]$  <sup>(7)</sup>

(where " $G$ " ranges over contingent properties, and " $\Box$ " denotes broadly logical necessity).

Taken together, (1)-(2) provide merely a sufficient condition for a property  $F$  to count as a future contingent property of an object, relative to a given time. Notice, in this connection, that there can be cases of future contingent properties which fail to satisfy condition (2). <sup>(8)</sup> E.g.,

F5: uttering the true sentence "It is not the case that John will visit New York at  $t_8$ ".

Nonetheless, the idea of a future contingent property is, I believe, clear enough.

In the light of the above remarks, let us now examine (PST) again. Whatever its plausibility, (PST) does not seem to hold for those cases in which  $F$  is a future contingent property of  $x$ , relative to  $t$ . For if  $x$  has  $F$  in virtue of some object  $y$  exemplifying a property  $G$  at a time  $t'$  later than  $t$ , then to the extent that some agent  $a$  has the power to bring about  $y$ 's not having  $G$  at  $t'$ , he also has the power to bring about  $x$ 's not having  $F$  at  $t$ . This observation enables us now to see how (FA) may be blocked.

<sup>(7)</sup> This account of the notion of a future contingent property of an object, relative to a given time, may seem open to the following objection: Let  $G$  be a property such that  $y$  is  $G$  at  $t =$  df it is not the case that  $y$  raised his arm at  $t$ , for the first time.

Suppose now that John raises his arm at  $t_1$ . Since "John raises his arm at  $t_1$ " entails "John is  $G$  at  $t_3$ ", it would seem to follow that raising his arm is a future contingent property of John relative to  $t_1$ , which is absurd. (Cf. John Fischer, "Facts, Freedom and Foreknowledge," *The Philosophical Review* 92 (1983), p. 75.)

Rebuttal: "John raises his arm at  $t_1$ ", even though it entails that John is  $G$  at  $t_3$ , does not entail the existence of times after  $t_1$ . The truth of "John raises arm at  $t_1$ " is perfectly compatible with there being no times after  $t_1$ , e.g., the world ceasing to exist immediately after  $t_1$ .

<sup>(8)</sup> For a more elaborate account of the notion of a future contingency, see my "Facts, Freedom and Foreknowledge" [together with Eddy M. Zemach] forthcoming in *Religious Studies*.

What needs to be shown is that the state of affairs

(X1) it is true at  $t_0$  that John will raise his arm at  $t_{10}$ ,

which the fatalist views as a case of an object having a property in the past, is one which involves a future contingent instantiation of that property, relative to  $t_0$ . To see this, let us first identify the relevant property and object (if any) involved in (X1). The most natural candidates for these are the sentence-type

S: John will raise his arm at  $t_{10}$ ,

and the property

T: being *true*.<sup>(9)</sup>

Next, let us recall that to say that S is true at  $t_0$  is tantamount to saying that

(X1') if someone uttered at  $t_0$  a token of the sentence-type "John will raise his arm at  $t_{10}$ ", he would be speaking truly.

Also, we know that

(X2) a  $t_0$ -token of "John will raise his arm at  $t_{10}$ " is true iff  $t_{10}$  is later than the time of its production, and John raises his arm at  $t_{10}$  <sup>(10)</sup>.

And now we see clearly that T is a future contingent property of S relative to  $t_0$ , since S has this property in virtue of John exemplifying at  $t_{10}$  the property of raising his arm. At this point a determined defender of (FA) might object that he does not agree with our construal of (X1) in terms of (X1'). But then what alternative such construal would he be able to offer us? He surely cannot, on pain of begging the question, construe (X1) in terms of

(X3) it was fated at  $t_0$  that John will raise his arm at  $t_{10}$ .

<sup>(9)</sup> The notion of truth as applied to sentence-types, though parasitic upon the notion of truth as applied to a sentence-token (or a proposition) differs from the latter. Truth as applied to sentence-types may vary with time and speaker.

<sup>(10)</sup> Cf. Stephen E. BRAUDE, "Tensed Sentences and Free Repeatability", *The Philosophical Review*, 82 (1973), p. 207.

Perhaps, preferring to treat truth simpliciter as a property of propositions rather than a property of sentence-tokens, he might suggest the following one:

(X1'') if someone uttered at  $t_0$  a token of the sentence-type "John will raise his arm at  $t_{10}$ ", he would express a true proposition.

However this way of construing (X1) will not do either. Whatever the proposition expressed by a  $t_0$ -token of S, part of it is that John raises his arm at  $t_{10}$ , and this proposition is true iff John exemplifies at  $t_{10}$  the property of raising his arm.

The conclusion which emerges is that the error committed by the fatalist in (FA) consists in his incorrect application of the principle of the unalterability of the past to states of affairs such as (X1). Given the fact that John raised his arm at  $t_{10}$ , we may perfectly agree with the fatalist that it was true from all eternity that he would do so. But this does not mean that it was not within his power to do otherwise. What our discussion has shown is that it was *John* who by acting in the way he did, brought that state of affairs about. To the extent that it was within John's power at  $t_0$  not to raise his arm at  $t_{10}$ , it also was within his power to bring it about that it was not true from all eternity that he would raise his arm at  $t_{10}$ . <sup>(11)</sup> Fatalism, no doubt, is a time-honored doctrine. However, this fact should not bar us from being careful when assessing the philosophical arguments for its plausibility. This paper was an attempt to expose the fallaciousness of one such argument. <sup>(12)</sup>

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<sup>(11)</sup> For a similar conclusion, see Peter VAN INWAGEN, *An Essay on Free Will* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 42. Van Inwagen, however, reaches this conclusion by a different route from mine.

<sup>(12)</sup> I would like to thank Eddy Zemach, Carl Ginet and Norman Kretzmann for some good discussions on fatalism. Also, I am indebted to a referee of *Logique et Analyse* for some very useful comments on an earlier version of this paper.