

The Incoherent Root of Theological Fatalism

LINDA ZAGZEBSKI

University of Oklahoma

lzagzebski@ou.edu

Abstract: This paper begins with a standard argument for theological fatalism and unravels deeper dilemmas in stages, arriving at an argument that has nothing to do with divine foreknowledge or free will. I then focus on the problem of the incoherence or at least confusion in the idea of the necessity of the past. In the final section I replace the necessity of the past with the causal closure of the past, and argue that the causal closure principle has the same problem of incoherence as the modal principle.

Keywords: Fatalism, Divine foreknowledge, Transfer of necessity, Necessity it earlier

1. A Standard Argument for Theological Fatalism

A perennial fear and object of extended philosophical analysis since the ancient Greeks is universal fatalism, by which I mean the thesis that everything happens out of necessity and therefore, we do not have free will. There are three historically important forms of it that have the same structure and are all forms of the same problem in the logic of time. Logical fatalism is the position that the truth of propositions about the future entails fatalism. Theological fatalism is the position that God's infallible knowledge of the future entails fatalism. Causal fatalism is the position that the state of the world in the distant past in conjunction with the laws of nature entails fatalism.

What I will do in the first section of this paper is to begin with an argument for theological fatalism that has a long history. I will then disentangle a deeper dilemma that is not about foreknowledge, and it is not about free will. My aim is to reveal an incoherence or at best confusion in the view of the necessity of the past presupposed in the argument. In the second section of the paper, I will look at a different version of the necessity of the past which interprets it as the causal closure of the past. I will argue that that view has similar problems of incoherence.

Fatalist arguments of all three kinds get their strength from the combination of two principles. One is the principle of the necessity of the past, which is informally expressed in the adage “There is no use crying over spilled milk.” For more than two millennia, beginning with Aristotle’s famous Sea Battle argument and the Master argument of Diodorus Cronus, the necessity of the past was interpreted as literally a kind of necessity, meticulously and influentially analyzed in the 14th century by William of Ockham, who called it accidental necessity. Ockham’s idea was that even though the truth value of a proposition never changes, its necessity value can change because of the passage of time. If a proposition p is about a causally and metaphysically contingent event in the future, there is now a potency in things for p and a potency in things for *not* p . Once the event expressed by p occurs and potency is reduced to act, the potency for *not* p is lost and p becomes accidentally necessary. The potency for *not* p can be lost because either (a) p is metaphysically necessary (There never was any potency for *not* p), (b) p is causally necessary (The potency for *not* p was lost once its past causes occurred), or (c) p is accidentally necessary. (The event p is about occurs).¹

The other principle is a transfer of necessity principle: [$\text{nec}_{\text{T}} p$ and $\text{nec}_{\text{L}} (p \rightarrow q)$] $\rightarrow \text{nec}_{\text{T}} q$. In English: if p is accidentally necessary (now-necessary) and p entails q , then q is accidentally necessary. Our initial argument also uses the principle of alternate possibilities which says that if someone S cannot do otherwise than A when she does A , then she does not do A freely.

These principles generate a fatalist argument from infallible foreknowledge that can be expressed in the following form:

Argument for theological fatalism

- (1) Suppose God infallibly believed yesterday that S will do A tomorrow.

From the principle of the necessity of the past we get:

- (2) It is now-necessary that God believed yesterday that S will do A tomorrow.

¹ I am interpreting metaphysical necessity, causal necessity, and accidental necessity as independent of each other, arising from different grounds for the reduction of potency to act. An alternative interpretation of Ockham would be that the distinction between accidental necessity and accidental contingency applies only to those propositions that are not already metaphysically or causally necessary. I believe that my interpretation is the clearest, but my arguments go through on the alternative interpretation with the necessary modifications.

From the definition of divine infallibility we get:

(3) Necessarily, if God believed yesterday that S will do A tomorrow, then S will do A tomorrow.

Following Ockham, it follows from 2,3, and the Transfer of Accidental Necessity principle that:

(4) It is now-necessary that S will do A tomorrow.

It follows from the idea that accidental necessity is a form of necessity that:

(5) If it is now-necessary that S will do A tomorrow, then S cannot refrain from doing A tomorrow.

The Principle of Alternate Possibilities states:

(6) If S cannot refrain from doing A tomorrow, then S does not do A tomorrow freely.

By 4, 5, 6 and hypothetical syllogism we can conclude:

(7) S does not do A tomorrow freely.

If, as traditional theists believe, God is omniscient as well as infallible in his beliefs, this argument can be generalized to any act in the future. Universal fatalism seems to follow.

There have been many variations of this argument in the literature on theological fatalism, but I do not believe that any of the variations deviates from this version in a significant way. In any case, I believe that this version is among the best.

2. Unravelling Theological Fatalism

2.1. First stage: Is the Problem Uniquely About God's Infallibility and Fatalism? No.

Notice that there is nothing in our argument for theological fatalism that refers to the personhood of God or to the attributes of God other than infallible foreknowledge. The argument is clearly intended to demonstrate an incompatibility

between infallible foreknowledge by any being whatever and human free will. Of course, God is the prime candidate for an actual infallible believer, but a focus on God hides the deeper fact that if there is free will in the world--in fact, if there are any contingent events at all, the argument purports to show that it is metaphysically impossible that anybody is infallible or becomes infallible in their knowledge about free acts or those events.² But the alleged connection between the ability to act freely and the epistemic ability of a completely independent being is exceedingly strange. Surely there is a *prima facie* principle that knowing *p* does not affect the truth of *p*. In fact, it is almost always thought to be the reverse. The truth of *p* comes first in logical order; knowing *p* is derivative. Of course, the adherent of the incompatibility of infallibility and free will does not deny this principle in general. It is only in the special case in which knowing is infallible that the principle does not hold. This is a problem for anybody, not just theists. It is a metaphysical problem. How can a mind's power of grasping reality affect the reality that is known? Even more odd, suppose a being who was first always correct but not infallible then becomes infallible. Do all future contingent events suddenly become necessary? There seems to be a bizarre relationship between knowledge and what it is knowledge about.

This leads us to a generalized argument for the incompatibility of infallible foreknowledge and human free will that does not refer to God. The argument is the same as our primary argument for theological fatalism, only it postulates a possible infallible foreknower that is neutral on the being's other attributes.

Argument that infallible believing entails fatalism

Consider the possibility of a being whose beliefs about future human choices are infallible. Let us call that being *IB*.

- (1) *IB* infallibly believed yesterday that *S* will do *A* tomorrow. (Assumption)
- (2) It is now-necessary that (1). (Necessity of the past)
- (3) Necessarily, if *IB* believed yesterday that *S* will do *A* tomorrow, then *S* will do *A* tomorrow. (Definition of infallibility).

² David Hunt (1998) showed many years ago that the theological problem and the metaphysical problem of infallible foreknowledge are distinct.

(4) (2) and (3) entail that it is now-necessary that S will do A tomorrow.
(Transfer of Necessity).

(5) Therefore, it is now-necessary that S will do A tomorrow. (2,3,4)

(6) If it is now-necessary that S will do A tomorrow, S will not do A tomorrow
freely.

(7) Therefore, S will not do A tomorrow freely.

This argument shows an apparent inconsistency between free will and infallible believing by any being whatever. Identifying that being with God is not necessary for the argument.

The fatalist argument is almost always treated as a dilemma. Either we do not have free will, or there is no infallible foreknower. Writers who want to affirm both free will and infallible foreknowledge therefore need to find a false premise or an invalid inference in the argument. I have chosen to present only valid arguments so that we can see what would have to be denied by someone who wants to affirm the first premise but also wants to escape the fatalist conclusion. Most putative “solutions” to the problem of theological fatalism point to a feature of God that hopefully escapes the unwanted commitment to fatalism. It is possible that some of these solutions succeed, but even if they do, they do not address the more general argument above. Either there is a solution to the general dilemma of infallible foreknowledge or there is not. If there is, the solution would presumably apply to the dilemma of theological fatalism, and it would not be necessary to give a special theological solution. If there is not, that would mean that there is a problem with the assumption that there is an infallible foreknower that is escaped only in the special case of divine foreknowledge. That might satisfy some theists, but the problem in the general argument still needs to be addressed. The fact that the dilemma of divine infallible foreknowledge and human free will can be so easily generalized shows that the problem goes beyond its theological interest.

Proposed solutions to the dilemma of infallible foreknowledge and human free will that are effective only against the theological form of the problem are therefore limited in their effectiveness against fatalism in spite of their theological relevance. I can think of four such solutions.

The first is the position that God is timeless. This solution goes back to Boethius³ and was adopted by Aquinas.⁴ It has many contemporary defenders, particularly those who favor Thomistic theology. This solution proposes that if God exists outside of time, his belief states are outside of time, and there is no worry that his belief states have the necessity of the past. The first premise of the argument for theological fatalism is false because God does not believe anything in the past, nor does God believe anything in the present or in the future. God is omniscient and infallible, but he believes everything timelessly. Elsewhere I have argued that this solution is inadequate (Zagzebski 2011),⁵ but my point here is that even if the solution works as a response to divine foreknowledge, it has no bearing on the general argument for the incompatibility of infallible foreknowledge and human free will.

A second solution that is explicitly theistic is William P. Alston's (1986) position that God does not have belief states. Alston adopts the common position that believing is a propositional attitude; it is a mental state directed at propositions. But God's mental states are not like ours, directed at discrete propositions. God grasps all concrete wholes at once, without needing to divide them into separate propositional bits. Even if God did assent to propositions, Alston argues, since God grasps all of reality at once, propositions are superfluous. This approach is Thomistic in spirit, and it refers to the distinctive way in which a divine being knows, a way that would not apply to the general problem of an infallible but non-divine being, one who presumably believes propositions.

A third solution that is explicitly theistic is Molinism, the theory that God knows the entire contingent future by combining his knowledge of his creative will with his knowledge of so-called counterfactuals of freedom, true propositions expressing what a given free creature would freely choose in any possible circumstance.⁶ By knowing each future circumstance and what a free creature would freely choose in that circumstance, God can know all future human acts infallibly without jeopardizing the freedom of his creatures. Such knowledge is called Middle

³ Boethius (1962), Book V Prose 6.

⁴ *ST I-I*, q. 14, a. 13, reply obj. 3.

⁵ In that paper I argue, among other things, that the timelessness solution works only if the timeless realm is not outside our control. But if there is a Principle of the Necessity of Eternity parallel to the Principle of the Necessity of the Past, another version of the fatalist argument can be formulated.

⁶ The doctrine of Middle Knowledge was vehemently debated in the 16th century, with the version of Luis de Molina, referred to as "Molinism," getting the most attention in the contemporary literature. It has received strong support by Thomas Flint (1998) and Eef Dekker (2000).

Knowledge. Notice that this solution gets its force from a theory about the power of God to know truths beyond the reach of any non-divine being. The approach will not be successful against the general dilemma of infallible but non-divine foreknowledge and human free will unless the imagined infallible being has other powers of God.

What about the Ockhamist solution? Ockham's idea is that even if God is in time, God's beliefs lack the necessity of the past because every such state is not strictly in the past. It is in the "soft past." The fact that a proposition about the future was true yesterday is a fact that is partly about the past and partly about the future. Similarly, Ockham argues, propositions about God's past beliefs (and God's past existence) are not strictly about the past. Like past truths about the future, they are in the soft past because they entail facts about the future. This approach is theistic, but it has an advantage over the other approaches I have mentioned since it does not refer to a divine property other than infallibility to escape the premise about the necessity of God's past beliefs. Presumably, Ockham could say (if he thought of it) that the past beliefs of *any* infallible believer are soft facts. If that could be made to work, the Ockhamist would have a solution to the general problem of infallible foreknowledge as well as to the theological problem.

The same cannot be said for the solution I called "Thomistic Ockhamism" in my first foreknowledge book (1991, Chap. 3). There I proposed strengthening Ockham's idea that God's beliefs are soft facts in time by adding Aquinas's idea that God knows everything all at once, a point that was also taken by Alston in his solution. If God's knowing is not divided into discrete bits occurring at particular moments of time, then even if God had beliefs in the past, he had those beliefs in a way that does not separate his past knowing from his future knowing. God's knowing state spreads out over time, and it is no more in the past than in the future. God's single all-encompassing knowing state therefore does not have the necessity of the past. But as much as I like this solution, it has the same problem as the other solutions that use Thomas's account of the divine nature. It is not applicable to the problem of infallible believing by a non-divine being.

The moral of the first stage of my argument reducing theological fatalism to a deeper problem is this: The dilemma of divine foreknowledge and human freedom is easily generalizable to a problem that is not uniquely theological but is metaphysical. That should bother the non-theist as much as the theist because it purports to show a logical incompatibility between the existence of human freedom, the conditions for which are presumably metaphysical, and an epistemic power of some independent being. That seems to force us into a very odd view of the world, one that conflicts with the intuitively plausible principle that the truth of *p* comes

first in logical order; knowing p comes second. The structure of the theological fatalist argument shows that the problem is not uniquely about God at all.

2.2. Second Stage: Is the Problem Uniquely about Infallibility and Fatalism? No.

The argument of the last section can be generalized further in a way that has nothing to do with free will. As we have seen, Ockham assumed that the past and future are modally contrastive in that there is a kind of necessity that the past has simply in virtue of being past, whereas the future is contingent with respect to that kind of necessity, and that is why propositions about particular events in time acquire this type of necessity only at the time of the event. The past is accidentally necessary, whereas the future is accidentally contingent. That is not to deny that the future can have some other kind of necessity, such as causal necessity, nor is it to deny that the past can have some other kind of contingency, such as causal contingency. But like Aristotle, Ockham believed that some events are in potency, so he accepted the idea that there are propositions p such that there is potency in things for p and there is potency in things for *not* p at a given time. Propositions about the future are not all causally necessary. If they were, there would be no point in proposing the idea of accidental necessity at all.

The modal difference between past and future defended by Ockham is inconsistent with the existence of an infallible foreknower apart from any considerations about free will. The fatalist arguments we have just looked at hide a deeper dilemma that is not about fatalism, but about time. That is because of the Ockhamist idea that the passage of time moves the accidentally contingent to the accidentally necessary as the occurrence of events in the future occur. The principle of the necessity of the past has a correlate in the principle of the contingency of the future. The past *qua* past is accidentally necessary; the future *qua* future is accidentally contingent.

When we make this distinction between accidental necessity and contingency explicit, we can see that it is inconsistent with infallible foreknowledge before we get to a premise about free will.

Argument that infallible believing is inconsistent with accidental necessity/contingency

- (1) Suppose that there is (and was before now) an infallible believer IB who has an infallible belief regarding F , a proposition about some future event.

(2) Either IB believed F before now or IB believed *not* F before now.

From (2), the Principle of the Necessity of the Past, and constructive dilemma, we get:

(3) Either it is now-necessary that IB believed F before now or it is now-necessary that IB believed *not* F before now.

From (1) and the definition of infallibility it follows that

(4) Necessarily (IB believed F before now $\rightarrow F$), and necessarily (IB believed *not* F before now $\rightarrow$ *not* F).

By the Transfer of accidental necessity principle, we get:

(5) Either it is now-necessary that F or it is now-necessary that *not* F .

(5) is logically equivalent to

(6) Either it is not now-possible that F or it is not now-possible that *not* F .

From the Principle of the accidental contingency of the future it follows that

(7) It is now-possible that F and it is now-possible that *not* F .

But (7) contradicts (5).⁷

From this argument we can see that the contrast between accidental necessity and accidental contingency is inconsistent with infallible foreknowledge. Fatalism makes no appearance in this argument. It is an argument about the logic of time. The argument also reveals an interesting contradiction in the fatalist use of the idea of the necessity of the past. The fatalist uses one half of the modal arrow of time in order to conclude that there is no arrow. Is there an arrow or not? Although fatalist arguments do not make the arrow explicit, the fatalist seems to be assuming the arrow at the beginning of the argument and then uses the premise of infallible

⁷ I first proposed an argument like this in the Appendix to my 1991 foreknowledge book. I repeated it in other papers, including my *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* entry on foreknowledge and free will. The latest version revised by David Hunt is at <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2022/entries/free-will-foreknowledge/>.

foreknowledge to deny the arrow. If there is an infallible believer and the past is accidentally necessary, then all events are accidentally necessary. There is no modal arrow of time.

Fatalism is important because we care about having free will, and solutions to fatalist arguments that focus on the requirements of free will have warranted an enormous amount of philosophical energy. But my reaction to these ways of avoiding fatalism is the same as my reaction to the distinctively theistic solutions to theological fatalism. Maybe these moves work, and maybe they don't. But if there is a deeper problem that has nothing to do with free will, perhaps it is not necessary for us to work so hard at finding a mistake in the premise about free will, just as it may not be necessary for us to work so hard to find a way around fatalism that focuses on the attributes of God. The underlying problem is not distinctively about God, nor is it distinctively about free will.

The argument I have given here shows an inconsistency in the combination of Ockham's idea of accidental necessity and contingency and the possibility of an infallible believer. That problem cannot be solved by another important response to the standard dilemma of theological fatalism: the denial of the Principle of Alternate Possibilities (PAP). That is the principle that free will requires the ability to do otherwise. PAP has many variations, but the particular form of the principle is irrelevant to the argument above since that argument does not refer to free will at all.

Fatalism has always been advertised as a clash between some well-known thesis like divine foreknowledge or causal determinism, and free will. Much effort has been placed on analyzing free will as a possible way to retain both infallible foreknowledge and free will, or causal determinism and free will. My argument here is that the problem arises with the notion of temporally asymmetrical necessity/contingency when combined with the Transfer of Necessity Principle. Something has gone wrong in the argument before we even get to the conditions for free will.

2.3. Third Stage: Is the Problem Uniquely about Infallibility and Time? No.

The problem in the logic of time is even deeper than a problem about combining infallibility with accidental necessity. When we looked carefully at the argument for theological fatalism in section 2.1, we noticed that the argument does not rely upon any properties of God except infallible foreknowledge. When we looked at the argument that infallible foreknowledge is inconsistent with the modal asymmetry of time in section 2.2, we saw that the problem arises from the relation of entailment

between infallible foreknowledge and events in the future. We can see now that that it does not matter if the entailment is due to infallible foreknowledge. The content of the proposition in question does not matter. What matters is the entailment relation. The problem arises from any assumption that there is a proposition about the past that entails propositions about the future when combined with this kind of necessity. The deeper metaphysical problem is not about free will; it is not even about infallible foreknowledge.

The structure of fatalist arguments depends only upon the necessity of the past, a transfer of necessity principle, and an entailment relation between past and future. It is the entailment between something in the past and something in the future that permits the fatalist to conclude that the future has the same necessity as the past, a conclusion that conflicts with the underlying Ockhamist assumption that the past and future are modally asymmetrical.

The underlying issue, then, is that it is impossible for there to be a type of modality that has the following features:

- (i) The past and future are asymmetrical in that the past is necessary with respect to this modality, whereas the future is contingent with respect to this modality.
- (ii) The Transfer of Necessity principle applies to this modality.
- (iii) There are true propositions about the past that entail propositions about the future.

Propositions (i)-(iii) form an inconsistent triad as we can see in the following argument:

Argument that accidental necessity/contingency is inconsistent with past/future entailment

Let P be a true proposition about the past. Assume that the past is now-necessary (accidentally necessary), and the future is now-contingent (accidentally contingent). Let F be a proposition about the future that is entailed by P .

(1) P

(2) It is now-necessary that P . (Necessity of the Past)

(3) Necessarily ($P \rightarrow F$).

(4) It is now-necessary that F . (Transfer of Necessity Principle).

But by the Principle of the Contingency of the Future, we get

(5) It is now contingent that F .

(5) contradicts (4).

Let us look at possible examples of past-future entailment that are inconsistent with accidental necessity/contingency. Imagine the possibility of a necessarily enduring being, one that is neither metaphysically nor causally necessary, but if it exists, its nature is such that it necessarily continues to exist. Suppose, for example, that God does not exist necessarily. There are some possible worlds in which God does not exist, and God's existence is not caused by anything in the past. But let's imagine that if God exists in any world, God's nature is such that it is necessary that God continues to exist in that world. That is to say, God is necessarily everlasting if God exists at all. That assumption is inconsistent with the alleged modal asymmetry of time:

(1) God existed in the past. (Assumption)

(2) It is now-necessary that God existed in the past. (Necessity of the Past)

(3) Necessarily, if God existed in the past, God will continue to exist in the future. (Assumption that God is necessarily everlasting)

(4) It is now-necessary that God will exist in the future. (Transfer of Necessity Principle).

By the Principle of the Contingency of the Future, we get

(5) It is now-contingent that God will exist in the future.

But (5) contradicts (4).

The existence of matter could be another example of a necessarily enduring being. Maybe matter is created by the choice of God, so it does not exist out of necessity,

but God made it to be such that necessarily, once matter exists, it continues to exist until the end of time. Maybe matter and the sequence of time necessarily co-exist because time is the measure of the motion of material objects. The Greek atomists had a theory of this kind. They maintained that there is nothing in the natural world but atoms and the void. Atoms persist throughout all time. I don't know if they would have said that the existence of an atom at one time entails its existence at later times, but I do not see anything incoherent about that theory. From another direction, Leibniz maintained that the only beings that are genuinely real are mind-like simple substances he called monads that cannot be destroyed. Again, I do not see anything incoherent in this theory, but these theories are incompatible with accidental necessity/contingency with a transfer principle, and the argument would be parallel to the above argument about a necessarily everlasting God.

I conclude that we cannot hold on to the concept of a temporally asymmetrical modality as long as there are the relevant entailments between past and future.⁸

"But wait!" the contemporary Ockhamist will say. "We and Ockham are smart enough to make distinctions. Ockham cleverly argued that if a proposition about the past entails a proposition about the future, it is not *really* about the past. It is partly about the past and partly about the future. It is in the "soft" past. There is no inconsistency in (i)-(iii) as long as we are clear that the principle of accidental necessity applies only to the hard past."⁹ We agree that no proposition about the hard

⁸ As I mentioned above, an alternative interpretation of Ockham is that accidental necessity and contingency do not apply to the entire past and entire future, but only to those propositions that are not metaphysically or causally necessary. With that interpretation, the inconsistency is among accidental necessity/contingency, the transfer principle, and any proposition about the past that entails a proposition about the metaphysically and causally contingent future.

⁹ Ockham did not clearly distinguish the hard past from the soft past on the basis of an entailment relation, but the following passage is suggestive:

Some propositions are about the present as regards both their wording and their subject matter. Where such [propositions] are concerned, it is universally true that every proposition about the present has [corresponding to it] a necessary one about the past—e.g., 'Socrates is seated,' 'Socrates is walking,' 'Socrates is just,' and the like.

Other propositions are about the present as regards their wording only and are equivalently about the future, since their truth depends on the truth of propositions about the future. Where such [propositions] are concerned, the rule that every true proposition about the present has [corresponding to it] a necessary one about the past is not true. Ockham (1983), trans. Adams and Kretzmann, 46-47. (Words in brackets added by translators).

Note that Ockham refers to a proposition in the past that "depends on" a proposition about the future. He does not say "entails" as far as I can see, but that is a reasonable contemporary interpretation. Marilyn Adams (1967) adopts that interpretation. As I have said, subsequent Ockhamists have recognized that it is unsatisfactory as a way of explaining the difference between

past entails a proposition about the future because by definition, all such propositions are in the soft past.”

This way of distinguishing the hard past from the soft past is no longer accepted because of a number of counterexamples, but suppose that it can be made to work with qualifications. If so, it would hold out the promise of giving us a way to handle our trilemma. There is no inconsistency in the triad (i)-(iii) as long as we are clear about what is really past and what is really future as intended in the distinction between accidental necessity and contingency. Any proposition about the past that entails a proposition about the future and has the necessary qualifications is in the soft past. But suppose that there is a proposition about the past that entails the entire future (God’s past foreknowledge) and a proposition about the future that entails the entire past (God’s future knowledge of the past). On Ockhamist reasoning, the entire past is in the soft past, and the entire future is in the soft future. There is no such thing as the hard past and the hard future. Presumably, that is counter-intuitive.

We have seen that many solutions to fatalist arguments do not work against deeper arguments, but there is one solution that I have not yet discussed, and which we can now see is not sufficient to handle the dilemma of stage 3. That is the position that propositions about the future have no truth value, a common solution to the dilemma of logical fatalism. Suppose for the sake of argument that no future contingent propositions are true. How would that help? The advocate of this way out would also have to deny entailment between any proposition about the past and a contingent proposition about the future.¹⁰ The denial of the truth of contingent propositions about the future does not solve the problem that there can be no entailments between past and future.

2.4. Conclusion: The Incoherence of Accidental Necessity

From the time of Aristotle up to the twenty-first century, the problem of fatalism was interpreted as a puzzle about time and modal logic. If the past is necessary, the argument goes, so is the future. I have argued that these arguments are incoherent because they rely upon an incoherent or at best confused idea about the modal arrow of time. The modal arrow must be rejected as long as any proposition about the past entails a proposition about the future. But notice that it is not only fatalists whose

the hard and soft past.

¹⁰ Patrick Todd (2021) argues that future contingent propositions are false, and he accepts the lack of entailment between past and future propositions.

positions are incoherent. Non-fatalists who accept the fatalist argument down to the premise about free will also have an incoherent position. Furthermore, we are all muddled if we do not have a way to escape the inconsistency of stage 3. Of course, none of this shows that fatalism is false. It is the use of the idea of accidental necessity in the arguments for fatalism that is the problem.

3. Revisiting the Necessity of the Past

3.1. *The Causal Closure of the Past and Fatalist Arguments*

What is left of the necessity of the past? Do we know that there is any such thing? If we give up the idea that the so-called necessity of the past is a form of necessity like Ockham's necessity *per accidens*, we still have the intuition that the past is outside our control. The past is causally closed. By that I mean that nothing now can either cause or prevent what has already happened. But it is not pastness in itself that puts something outside the realm of our causal power. It is pastness plus the metaphysical law that causes must precede their effects.

It is hard to know what ordinary people believe about the necessity of the past, but it is unlikely that people who say that there is no use crying over spilled milk mean to say that the past is "necessary" in the sense in which the necessary can be inter-defined in standard ways with the possible, the impossible, and the contingent. If a proposition *p* is necessary, *p* is possible, but if milk was spilled, do ordinary people say that the proposition *Milk was spilled* is possible? The negation of a necessary truth is impossible, but would they say that *Milk was spilled* is necessary, and *Milk was not spilled* is impossible? They might, but it would be very unnatural to say such things. What is more likely is that both *Milk was spilled* and *Milk was not spilled* are put in the category of what we cannot do anything about. We can neither cause the past spilling of milk, nor prevent it from being spilled. Both the actual past and alternative pasts are beyond our causal power. In fact, actual and counterfactual pasts are beyond the causal power of anything, not just human agents. If that is right, ordinary intuition supports my contention that the idea of the necessity of the past is not about accidental necessity. It is the idea that the past is causally closed.

Using this interpretation of the necessity of the past, we can reformulate the theological fatalist argument of Section 2. Let me begin with a definition and two principles.

Definition of causal closure

Event E is now causally closed =_{df} There is nothing now that can cause E, and there is nothing now that can cause not E.

We will need to replace the principle of the necessity of the past with the following principle:

Principle of the Causal Closure of the Past

If E is an event in the past, E is now causally closed.

We will also need to replace the Transfer of Accidental Necessity Principle with the following:

Transfer of Causal Closure Principle

If E occurs and is now causally closed, and if necessarily, if E occurs then F occurs, then F occurs (or will occur) and is now causally closed.

Argument for theological fatalism from causal closure

(1) Suppose God infallibly believed yesterday that S will do A tomorrow.

From the principle of the causal closure of the past we get:

(2) God's believing yesterday that S will do A tomorrow is now causally closed.

From the definition of divine infallibility we get:

(3) Necessarily, if God believed yesterday that S will do A tomorrow, then S will do A tomorrow.

From 2, 3, and the Transfer of Causal Closure principle, we get:

(4) S will do A tomorrow and it is now causally closed that S will do A tomorrow.

From the definition of causal closure, we can conclude:

(5) If S will do A tomorrow and it is now causally closed that S will do A tomorrow, then S cannot cause it to happen that S does not do A tomorrow.

The Principle of Alternate Possibilities states:

(6) If S cannot cause it to happen that S does not do A tomorrow, then S will not do A tomorrow freely.

By 4, 5, 6 and hypothetical syllogism we conclude:

(7) S will not do A tomorrow freely.

This argument has two important differences from the theological argument with which we began. Although structurally identical to that argument, both the change from the accidental necessity of the past to the causal closure of the past and the change from the Transfer of Accidental Necessity Principle to the Transfer of Causal Closure Principle alter the argument in significant ways.

First, let us look at the second premise of the argument. That premise refers to the causal closure of something that is probably not in the causal domain, and it then argues that what that entails is causally closed. Whatever the relation is between God's beliefs and our acts, it is doubtful that it is causal. The problem here is that something outside the causal realm can entail something within the causal realm over which we have causal power. The fact that $2 + 2 = 4$ is presumably outside the causal realm, and it entails that anybody who puts two green apples and two red apples in a basket thereby puts four apples in the basket. But that does not deprive Ann of the causal power to put four apples in her basket by putting two green and two red apples in her basket.

The second difference between the new arguments and the arguments in section 2 is the formulation of the Transfer of Causal Closure Principle. That principle does not have the force of logic, so it is more open to criticism than the Transfer of Accidental Necessity Principle. But more importantly, the Transfer of Causal Closure Principle licenses the inference to (4), and the generalization of (4) is a denial that there are causes of the future. Most of us assume that it is uncontroversial that something now, whether agents or events, can cause future events.

This issue arises because the Principle of the Causal Closure of the Past has two conjuncts. One is the following:

Principle of the non-causability of the past

If E is an event in the past, nothing now can cause E.

The relevant half of the transfer of causal closure principle for this conjunct is the following:

Transfer of non-causability principle

If E occurs and is now non-causable, and if necessarily, if E occurs then F occurs, then F occurs (will occur) and is now non-causable.

But nobody would argue as follows:

(1) Suppose God believed yesterday that S will do A tomorrow.

From the principle of the non-causability of the past, we get:

(2) There is nothing now that can cause God to have believed yesterday that S will do A tomorrow.

(3) Necessarily, if God believed yesterday that S will do A tomorrow, then S will do A tomorrow.

Therefore,

(4) S will do A tomorrow and there is nothing now that can cause S to do A tomorrow.

Presumably (4) is false because (4) denies that there are causes of events in the future.

On the other hand, if we take just the second half of the principle of the causal closure of the past, we get an argument for fatalism that many philosophers treat seriously:

Principle of the unpreventability of the past

If E is an event in the past, nothing now can cause not E.

The relevant half of the transfer of causal closure principle gives us the following:

Transfer of unpreventability principle

If E occurs and it is now non-causable that E does not occur, and if necessarily, if E occurs then F occurs, then F occurs and it is now non-causable that F does not occur.

The causal closure of the past expresses the causal arrow, which says that the past can be neither caused nor prevented. Nobody can cause it to happen, and nobody can cause it not to happen. But half of the principle denies that there are causes of the future. Licensing a transfer principle for the non-causability of the past leads to the non-causability of the future, and most people think it is obvious that the future is causable by something. That principle is not mentioned in fatalist arguments, which suggests that even fatalists consider it implausible. The transfer principle for the unpreventability of the past is the governing principle in the argument, and the transfer of non-causability principle is cunningly left aside. But why accept one half of the causal closure of the past and not the other? If those who think that the actual future is causable take that to be a reason to deny the transfer of non-causability principle, then it seems to me that those who think that alternative futures are causable have reason to deny the transfer of unpreventability principle. At a minimum, the explanation for the difference in the two principles needs to be addressed. The transfer of unpreventability principle cannot be based on a false transfer of causal closure.

Here is a reply I would expect. "Well, we all agree that something can cause the future, so the transfer of non-causability principle is invalid, but we do not agree that something can cause alternate futures, and so the transfer of unpreventability principle cannot be rejected on the grounds that all agree that it endorses inference from a truth to a falsehood." But this answer cuts both ways. It makes it clear that the fatalist conclusion of the preceding argument is not something to which we are forced by principles we all endorse. Rather, the transfer principle that endorses the fatalist conclusion is as disputable as fatalism. The non-causability of the past and the unpreventability of the past are both part of the same intuition that the past is causally closed. Neither transfer principle is a principle of logic like the transfer of necessity principle, and both principles license an inference to a metaphysical conclusion that is unacceptable to most or many people. More needs to be said about what is going on in the intuition of the causal closure of the past. It is not enough to note that the argument supports fatalism when half of the intuition generating the argument has consequences that are unacceptable to most people.

Let's look now at how the fatalist argument from the unpreventability of the past uses the causal arrow. In Section 2 I argued that the fatalist argument from infallible

foreknowledge presupposes the modal arrow and then uses it to argue that there is no modal arrow. The argument for causal fatalism does the same thing. The causal closure of the past gets its plausibility because of the presumption of the causal arrow, but the argument then uses it to argue that there isn't a causal arrow because the future is as causally closed as the past.

I conclude that the argument for fatalism from the unpreventability of the past has at least two problems. One is that the unpreventability of the past is plausible only because it is half of the causal closure of the past, where the other half has the consequence that there are no causes of the future. The second problem is that the argument appears to assume the causal arrow in order to deny it. Is there a causal arrow or not? If there is not, the intuition underlying the premise of the causal closure of the past needs to be addressed for the same reason the intuition underlying the necessity of the past in the arguments of Section 2 needs to be addressed. The arguments waffle between the idea of the necessity of the past *qua* past and its rejection.

3.2. The Causal Arrow and the Causal Trilemma

In section 2.3 I argued that standard fatalist arguments reduce to a trilemma. There is an inconsistency in combining a modal arrow of time, a transfer of accidental necessity principle, and the assumption that there are propositions about the past that entail propositions about the future. Accidental necessity and contingency do not make sense when combined with theses of entailment between past and future. For that reason, I concluded that the idea of accidental necessity is incoherent, and the most plausible interpretation of the necessity of the past is that the past is causally closed. Does that change escape the problem of that section? I think not. I have said that I believe that the relation between God's beliefs and events in the world are outside the causal domain, but suppose instead that divine beliefs and our acts causally interact. With that assumption, we are confronted with a parallel trilemma in combining the causal arrow of time, a transfer of non-causability principle, and infallible divine foreknowledge.

The problem is that there is an inconsistency among the following:

- (1) The causal arrow

Causes exist (and existed in the past) and operate in a forward direction, not a backward direction. Past events are non-causable. Future events are causable. Laws of causality are non-causable.

(2) Transfer of non-causability principle

If E occurs and is now non-causable, and if necessarily, if E occurs then F occurs, then F occurs and is now non-causable.

(3) Thesis of infallible foreknowledge: Necessarily, God's past beliefs entail the entire future.

Since (1) tells us that the past and the laws are non-causable, it follows from the thesis of infallible foreknowledge and the transfer of non-causability principle that the future is non-causable. But (1) says that the future is causable.

Suppose we use the transfer of unpreventability principle instead. If the causal arrow means that the past is unpreventable and the future is not unpreventable, we get a straightforward contradiction among:

(1) The causal arrow—the past is unpreventable, the future is not unpreventable

(2) Transfer of unpreventability principle

(3) Thesis of infallible foreknowledge

This trilemma can be generalized the same way the trilemma of section 2.3 was generalized. There is an inconsistency among the arrow of unpreventability, the transfer of unpreventability principle, and a thesis about the past that entails a proposition about the future such as the thesis of infallible foreknowledge or causal determinism.

The causal arrow is collapsing, but there is more than one way the causal arrow can collapse. The fatalist argues that it collapses because the future, like the past, is non-causable and unpreventable. Another way to reject the causal arrow is to maintain that the past, like the future is causable. There is backward causation. I have argued that the arrow collapses because it is incompatible with propositions about the past that entail propositions about the future. The thesis of divine foreknowledge is only one of them. The theological dilemma can be resolved by denying that there is infallible foreknowledge, but the trilemma applies to any proposition about the past that entails a proposition about the future, including causal determinism.

I have argued that both the assumption of a modal arrow of time and the assumption of a causal arrow of time are inconsistent with entailments between past and future when a transfer principle is used. I conclude that whatever we think of theological fatalism, the problem is not just a theological dilemma. There are deep inconsistencies in our notion of time and its arrows.¹¹

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