Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers

Volume 5 | Issue 2

Article 6

4-1-1988

Fatalism and the Omnitemporality of Truth

Richard L. Purtill

Follow this and additional works at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy>

Recommended Citation

Purtill, Richard L. (1988) "Fatalism and the Omnitemporality of Truth," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 5 : Iss. 2 , Article 6.

DOI: 10.5840/faithphil19885223

Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol5/iss2/6>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers by an authorized editor of ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange.

FATALISM AND THE OMNITEMPORALITY OF TRUTH

Richard L. Purtill

In this paper I will show that the omnitemporality of truth does indeed imply fatalism if the past is unchangeable. I then argue that it is very likely indeed that the past is unchangeable and thus, since it is very likely that fatalism is false, it is very likely that the doctrine of the omnitemporality of truth is false. I argue that the rejection of the omnitemporality of truth has no undesirable consequences for either logic or theology, that in fact the logical and theological consequences of the rejection of the omnitemporality of truth are beneficial to both disciplines.

I begin with some definitions. By fatalism I mean the doctrine that there is nothing which we can do now which will make any statement about the future either true or false. To put it in another way, every future event is beyond our control if fatalism is true. By the omnitemporality of truth I mean the doctrine that any statement which is true at any time is true at all times previous to and all times subsequent to that time. By the unchangeability of the past I mean the doctrine that there is nothing which we can do now which will make any statement about the past either true or false, that is, the past is beyond our control.

Given these definitions I argue as follows. Consider some statement about the future, for example, "Geraldine Ferraro will be the president of the United States in 1990." Call this statement F1. Now by the end of 1990 this statement, F1, will be either true or its denial will be true. But by the doctrine of the omnitemporality of truth this means that either this statement, F1, or its denial was true in 1890. The statement, "it was true in 1890 that Geraldine Ferraro would be president of the United States in 1990," which we will call P1, is a statement about the past. If this statement, P1, is true, then the statement about the future, F1, imbedded in it must be true: the statement about the past, P1, logically implies the truth of the statement about the future, F1.

If P1, the statement about the past, is false this does not logically imply that the statement about the future is false, but there is another statement about the past which we will call P2. "It was true in 1890 that Geraldine Ferraro would not be President of the United States in 1990" which does imply the falsity of our original statement, F1. Now since P1 and P2 are statements about the past there is nothing I can do now to make them true or false, say, for example, to make

P1 true and P2 false. The truth or falsity of P1 and P2 are unchangeable by me, beyond my control.

Now it seems as clear as anything in logic can be that the logical consequences of what I cannot change are things I cannot change, that if A is beyond my control, and B is a logical consequence of A, then B is beyond my control. Anyone who doubts this logical principle is invited to provide a counter example to it which is coherent, much less plausible.

Since the truth or falsity of F1 is a logical consequence of the truth or falsity of P1 and P2, and since the truth or falsity of P1 and P2, being in the past, is beyond my control, then the truth or falsity of F1 is beyond my control: nothing I can do now will make F1 either true or false. Since it seems clear that a similar argument will hold true for any combination of persons there is nothing any of us alone or in cooperation can do to make F1 true or false. Thus it would seem pointless to debate, deliberate, plan or campaign for the election of Ms. Ferraro: nothing we can do now will make it true or false that she will be president in 1990.

Since the same argument applies to any statement about the future, it is in general as pointless to debate, deliberate, plan, or strive for any future result as it is to do these things about the past: the future is as much beyond our control as the past. Put briefly, given the doctrine of the omnitemporality of truth, the totality of true statements about the future is a logical consequence of the totality of the true statements about the past. Since I cannot now bring about the truth or falsity of any statement about the past I cannot now bring about the truth or falsity of any statement about the future. The principle that makes the totality of statements about the future a logical consequence of the totality of the statements about the past is the principle of the omnitemporality of truth. Thus, as I promised, I have shown that if the doctrine of the omnitemporality of truth is true, then if the past is unchangeable then fatalism is true.¹

However, some philosophers would raise the following objection to the argument I have just given. There are two kinds of facts about the past: *hard facts* which cannot be changed and *soft facts* which can be changed.² An example of a hard fact is that Lincoln was assassinated: nothing can now change that truth about the past. But the past truth or falsity of statements about the future such as "Geraldine Ferraro will be President of the United States in 1990" *depends* on what happens in the future and can in that sense be changed by what happens in the future. Backward *causation* may be impossible, but "backwards epistemological dependence" is not. Thus a key premise of the argument, that past facts cannot be changed, fails and so the argument as a whole fails.

My difficulty with this reply is to see just what is meant by a "soft fact" about the past. So far as I can see there are two possible interpretations and the crux between them can be illustrated in this way: Suppose that in 1890 God makes a list of all true statements about occupants of the U.S. Presidency. "Lincoln

was assassinated in 1865" would certainly appear on this list. But would either "Geraldine Ferraro will be president of the U.S. in 1990" or "Geraldine Ferraro will not be president of the U.S. in 1990" be on this list? If the answer to this is "no" then we have what I will call the *retrospective* view of soft facts, which is the view that as soon as a statement becomes true we should *retrospectively* list it among statements which were true in the past. The retrospective view seems to me to be implausible but harmless.

On the other hand, if we say that either "Geraldine Ferraro will be president of the U.S. in 1990" or "Geraldine Ferraro will not be president of the U.S. in 1990" *would* be on that list in 1890 we have to ask if it ever happens that whichever of the two statements *was* on the list is later replaced by the *other* statement. If the answer is "no" I simply fail to see any distinction between hard and soft facts about the past. Since the statement *was* true or false, and it never changes its truth value, what is *meant* by saying that it *could* change its truth value? If the answer is "yes" we get what I call the *revisionist* view of soft facts which seems to me less harmless but even less plausible than the retrospective view.

On the retrospective view the list of statements which were true in 1890 is constantly *growing*. On the revisionist view the list of statements which were true in 1890 is constantly *changing*. The first view undermines my argument only in the sense that it trivializes the omnitemporality of truth; we now mean so little by saying that statements are always true if true at all that no fatalistic consequences can be derived. The second view rejects the omnitemporality of truth in that true statements can *change* their truth value. But this view seems much less plausible than the common sense view I now wish to state.

On this view, the past is indeed unchangeable, but the future is not. Some statements about the future are indeed true (or false) now and always have been. (As a theist I believe that "God will exist in 1990" is among these statements, as well as many omnitemporally true statements in logic, mathematics and metaphysics.) However other statements about the future are not now either true or false: they have a probability between zero and one. This probability varies from day to day, indeed very likely from instant to instant. (I am inclined to believe that the probability of F1 increased after Ms. Ferraro's debate with George Bush and decreased when she made her Pepsi commercial, but I may be wrong.) By the end of 1990, the probability of F1 will be either one or zero: it will be either true or false. Thus there *are* no true statements like P1 and P2, and when F1 becomes true or false, it has no effect at all on what was true or false in 1890.³

I believe that this view of the matter is true, and that it is, as I have said, a commonsensical view. Indeed I believe that it is presupposed in almost everything most of us say or do about the future, and that fatalism in practice is just as

impossible as fundamental skepticism in practice. (These are among my reasons for thinking the view is *true*.)

If one looks for arguments in favor of the doctrine of the omnitemporality of truth these seem of be of two kinds: first, the claim that it is a presupposition of logic, and, second, that rejecting the omnitemporality of truth will lead to certain undesirable consequences in logic or theology. As to the first claim, it may be true that logic as standardly taught and practiced does make the assumption that truth is omnitemporal. But then standard logic makes all sorts of simplifying assumptions in order to get on with its major concerns, and when we try to apply standard logic to ordinary language and real-life problems we often have to re-examine and reject these simplifying assumptions. When we use logic for meta-mathematics it is quite safe to assume the omnitemporality of truth, for mathematical truths *are* omnitemporally true, but when we use logic for metaphysics it would be well to carefully examine such assumptions, for our logical practice should not prejudice any metaphysical question; logic must be metaphysically neutral or it becomes bad (because unacknowledged) metaphysics.

The most common allegation about the bad consequences of abandoning the principle of the omnitemporality of truth is that if we abandon the omnitemporality of truth we lose the principle of excluded middle: " $(p \vee \sim p)$ " Proponents of the omnitemporality of truth ask rhetorically what we are to make of statements about the future which are not true, but not false either. Surely if a statement is not true it must be false, or at least nonsensical. And surely "Geraldine Ferraro will be the U.S. President in 1990" is not nonsensical.

However, this neglects a distinction which is the very *pons asinorum* of this topic; the distinction between the principle of excluded middle and the principle of bivalence. To make the distinction clear it is only necessary to examine Probability Theory. In standard Probability Theory the principle of excluded middle holds, in the form: " $\Pr (p \vee \sim p) = 1$ for all values of p ." However the principle of bivalence, which would have the form, " p has the value 0 if and only if it does not have the value of 1" is simply false in standard probability theory. In fact if we insert that assumption, probability theory simply collapses into standard propositional logic. Propositional logic is a special case of probability theory, or if you prefer, probability theory is an extension of propositional logic.

Confusion is sometimes caused by the fact that in any *finite* valued multi-valued logic we do lose some of the theorems of propositional logic. However in probability theory, which is an infinite valued multi-valued logic, every theorem of standard propositional logic is preserved. (This is not always an advantage: the principle of Addition, " p implies p or q ," which is responsible for a good deal of the lack of fit between propositional logic and ordinary reasoning, is also preserved.)

Thus the positive benefit to logic of rejecting the principle of the omnitemporality of truth is that it reminds us that propositional logic is only a special limited case of a wider system, and can be used only where certain limiting conditions apply (just as ordinary addition of velocities is only a special case of Einsteinian addition of velocities, which can be used where speeds are much less than the speed of light).

Of course the availability of an infinite valued logic does not in any way settle the question of whether the omnitemporality of truth is an acceptable metaphysical principle. All it does is to remove one objection to abandoning the principle, an objection based on a false absolutism as to the metaphysical presuppositions of "logic." Whether or not the principle of excluded middle is a presupposition of any coherent logic, the principle of bivalence certainly is not.

I now turn to the alleged theological consequences of rejecting the omnitemporality of truth. In traditional Christian theology God is seen as omniscient: He knows every true statement. Traditionally this has been thought to include a detailed set of true statements about the future: every detail of the future has been thought to be present to God. The idea that many statements about the future are neither true nor false but have only a certain probability, seems to run counter to this picture. Surely, a traditional theist might say, God knows the truth as to whether Ms. Ferraro will be president in 1990. But you claim that there is now no truth of the matter, so how can God know it?

The short answer is the He does not. God knows the truth of all true statements, the falsity of all false statements and the probability of all statements which are neither true or false. Thus He knows the exact probability that Ms. Ferraro will be president in 1990, but He does *not* know that she will be *nor* that she won't be. There is no such fact to know, and thus it is not a limitation of God's omniscience not to know it.

I will consider three objections to this from the point of view of traditional Christian theism. The first objection is that this view goes against a long tradition of Christian teaching. But I am not at all sure that this is true. The Christian God is the God of History, Who interacts with human beings, Who responds to prayer and penance. There has always been a tension between this idea and the static conception of God which came into Christian theology from Neoplatonic philosophy. I think that every Biblical passage and every Christian tradition about God's knowledge of the future is quite consistent with the view that some statements about the future are neither true nor false and thus are not known by God to be true or false. Those who think otherwise are challenged to produce such a Biblical passage or Christian tradition.

Certainly God is pictured in scripture and tradition as knowing *some* facts about the future, and this brings us to the second objection; the objection from prophecy. Certainly in scripture and Christian tradition God and His representa-

tives are pictured as knowing that certain things would occur in the future, and making prophecies about these things. But this is certainly quite compatible with the view that many statements about the future are neither true or false. Some future events may be already "present in their causes," that is, may be inevitable unless God miraculously intervenes. Some events may be things which God is determined to bring about and of course has the power to bring about. But that *some* future events are inevitable does not mean that all are.

I would argue that the best model of the future is that of a network of off-branching and interconnecting paths. A given future event may lie ahead on every available path but the paths to and from that event may be very different depending on what choices are made. For instances, it might have been inevitable that Christ would be put to death but the manner of His death might have been very different if Pilate or the Jewish authorities had made different decisions. At some point it might have been inevitable that Judas would betray Christ, but he might, like Peter, have repented immediately and become a great saint. But at any rate there seems to be no argument from prophecy to the view that God has a detailed knowledge of *every* future event.

Finally it might be objected that to say that God does not have a detailed knowledge of every future event is to denigrate the power of God, disrespectfully or even blasphemously. However it is not really respectful of God to attribute to Him *impossible* powers: to say that He can make a square circle or a weight which He cannot lift. If the future is not "there" to know, so to speak, then saying that God knows it anyway is just as silly as saying that God is so powerful that He can make a circle with corners.

There are certainly alternative views about God's knowledge of the future which should be respectfully considered, for instance, the Boethian view that God is outside of time and *sees* rather than *foresees* the future. There seem to me to be two major difficulties about the Boethian view. The first is the difficulty raised by Norman Kretzmann in 1966;⁴ that on this view it is difficult if not impossible to give any sense to the notion of God knowing what state the universe is in *now*. So if knowing what state the universe is in now is an important fact then there is an important fact which God does not know. But if the idea of the universe being in a certain state *now* is not an important fact, but merely an illusion caused by human perspective, we have surely arrived at a "block universe" view which is fatalistic.

The second major difficulty about the Boethian view is that it is difficult on this view to see how there can be any genuine interaction between us and God. We ordinarily think of God as acting in response to certain actions of ours, which occur in time. I pray and in response God answers my prayer. I ask for God's forgiveness and in response God forgives me. God's responses we think of as taking place *after* my action and in some sense *because* of my action (my

action is a *condition* of the response, though it does not determine the response). Now on the Boethian view God sees everything that ever has happened, or ever will happen in one "eternal now." He responds to this "seeing" with one eternal action which we perceive as a number of distant actions taking place in time. There is, no doubt, some sense in which this one eternal action is in part a response to my prayer at a given time, to my repentance at a given time. But to a considerable extent we lose the sense that we are *interacting* with God.⁵

There may be ways out of both difficulties, but until we see what these are it seems to me that the Boethian view is less credible than the competing view that we have sketched.

And to counterattack on this point of respect for God's power, it seems to me that an active and dynamic picture of God, a God who providentially guides His creation along the branching paths of possibility is far more religiously adequate than the static Neoplatonic conception. To say that God is the Lord of History is to say that His power shapes and molds a dynamic changing world. Even the Boethian view seems open to the objection that interaction between God and history is only apparent: all God's actions must somehow be one action done in His "eternal now."

I would go further and say that the conception of a God who merely contemplates in an "eternal now" a future which is totally present to Him is religiously *less* adequate than the picture of a "venturing God" who acts to bring about a *perilous* good, a good that might fail to happen.

To conclude, I think that the logical and theological objections to the idea of an open future where every detail is not settled share a common characteristic; a sort of metaphysical timidity. Logic can deal quite well with the notion of infinite possibilities: it does not need to confine itself to statements which are now or always true or false. And a theology which insists that for God every detail must be cut and dried owes less to respect for God than it owes to the limitations of the believers' imaginations. Both logic and theology attempt to capture something too great for them in formulas and definitions. Life will always be larger than logic. God will always be greater than theology. But there is no need to artificially limit either our logic or our theology, to exaggerate their inadequacy by unnecessary limitations.

Western Washington University

NOTES

1. Similar arguments have been given by other philosophers, e.g., Richard Sorabji *Time, Creation and the Continuum* (Ithaca, N.Y. Cornell University Press, 1983) pp. 132-35 and 255-56.

My own version of this argument is designed to bring out the part played in the argument by the unchangeability of the past, the doctrine of the omnitemporality of truth, and the way in which the unchangeability carries over from statements about the past to statements about the future which they imply.

2. One of the best recent discussions of this distinction is "Hard and Soft Facts" by Joshua Hoffman and Gary Rosenkrantz, (*Philosophical Review*, July 1984) which contains the necessary references to earlier discussions. Oddly enough, however, the discussion has mainly centered around the definition of hard and soft facts and the key issue of what we *mean* by saying that soft facts about the past can be changed has largely been lost sight of.

3. Philosophical defenders of this view include Aristotle (in *On Interpretation* Ch. 9) and some of the medieval philosophers, but until the formulation of a precise mathematical theory of probabilities it was not possible to adequately state our common sense intuitions on this point. Modern defenders (for very different reasons) of an "open future" view include Charles Hartshorne, C. D. Broad and Arthur Prior. Such originality as is possessed by my own formulation lies in bringing out the *probabilistic* element in the view, and its implications.

4. Norman Kretzmann, "Omniscience and Immutability" *Journal of Philosophy* 63, July 14, 1966. See also Nicholas Wolterstorff, "God Everlasting" in Orlebeke and Smedes (eds.) *God and the Good* (Grand Rapids, MI, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1975).

5. See William P. Alston, "Divine Human Dialogue and the Nature of God," *Faith and Philosophy* Vol. 2, No. 1, January 1985, for an excellent defense of the Boethian view. But Alston himself mentions "those undoubtedly numerous persons who have failed to be convinced" by his arguments. The present paper is an explanation and defense of what Alston calls the "intermediate view" (p. 17).