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# FATALISM: LOGICAL AND THEOLOGICAL

Alicia Finch and Ted A. Warfield

The logical fatalist holds that the past truth of future tense propositions is incompatible with libertarian freedom. The theological fatalist holds that the combination of God's past beliefs with His essential omniscience is incompatible with libertarian freedom. There is an ongoing dispute over the relation between these two kinds of fatalism: some philosophers believe that the problems are equivalent while others believe that the theological problem is more difficult. We offer a diagnosis of this dispute showing that one's view of the modal status of God's existence and God's relation to free creatures should determine one's position on the relation between the two fatalisms.

The problem of logical fatalism is generated by arguments purporting to show that, for example,

(1) Plantinga will freely climb Mount Rushmore in 2000 AD.

is incompatible with

(2) It was true in 50 AD that Plantinga will climb Mount Rushmore in 2000 AD.<sup>1</sup>

Similarly, the problem of theological fatalism is generated by arguments purporting to show that, to use the same example, (1) is incompatible with

(3) God knew in 50 AD that Plantinga will climb Mount Rushmore in 2000 AD.<sup>2</sup>

There is a long-running controversy over the relation between these two problems. On one side of the controversy are those philosophers who contend that the two problems are equivalent, that the theological problem is merely an alternative presentation of the logical problem. Alvin Plantinga is one advocate of this view. Others include, for example, William Lane Craig who claims that "theological fatalism is really just a variation of logical fatalism", and Richard Taylor who claims that the theological components of a theological argument for fatalism "add



nothing to the force of the argument" (though, he adds, they may help to "convey the reasoning more easily to the unphilosophical imagination").<sup>3</sup> On the other side of the controversy (and this, so far as we can tell, is the side on which the majority opinion lies) are those who hold that theological fatalism is a more difficult problem for proponents of freedom than the logical problem. Linda Zagzebski, for example, says that "the threat of logical fatalism is weaker than the threat of theological fatalism" and Willam Hasker and Nelson Pike agree.<sup>4</sup>

We think that by understanding both the problem of logical fatalism and the problem of theological fatalism as problems concerning the logical consistency of the (representative) propositions, we are in a position to make some progress towards a resolution of this controversy. In particular, we think that understanding both problems this way allows us not only to make a more accurate assessment of the relative difficulties of the two problems but also to diagnose the widespread disagreement over the relative levels of difficulty of the two problems.

Let's begin with a simple point. (3) implies (2) and so a demonstration of the consistency of (3) and (1), that is, a solution to the problem of theological fatalism, would therefore demonstrate the compatibility of (2) and (1) and would therefore solve the problem of logical fatalism. Similarly, but more weakly, an argument showing that (3) and (1) are plausibly consistent would, because (3) implies (2), show that (2) and (1) are at least plausibly consistent. It is presumably for this reason that no one, to our knowledge, has claimed that the problem of logical fatalism is a more difficult problem than the problem of theological fatalism. But is the theological problem more difficult than the logical problem or are the two problems equivalent?

On our way of understanding these problems, this question is most easily answered by answering this question: Does (2) imply (3)? If (2) does imply (3) then the consistency of (2) and (1) implies the consistency of (3) and (1) and so (since, as we've already seen, the consistency of (3) and (1) implies the consistency of (2) and (1)) the theological and logical problems are equivalent. On the other hand, if (2) does not imply (3) then it is clear that the theological problem is formally stronger than the logical problem.

So, we must ask, does (2) imply (3) or doesn't it? It might initially appear that the correct answer to this question is an emphatic "no". For consider a world in which (2) is true but in which God does not exist. Since God does not exist in this world, it is not the case that God has beliefs and so (3) is false. So it seems clear that (2) does not imply (3) which, if correct, shows that the problem of theological fatalism is a formally stronger problem than the problem of logical fatalism.

Despite this attractive argument for the thesis that the theological problem is formally stronger than the logical problem, however, the issue is not so easily resolved. Many (if not all) of the theists who maintain that the problems of logical and theological fatalism are equivalent would reject the above line of reasoning for the claim that (2) does not imply (3). According to at least many of these theists, God exists in all possible worlds. If this is correct, of course, there is no possible world in which (2) is true and in which God does not exist. Indeed, if God does exist in all possible worlds, then any world in which (2) is true is a world in which God exists and, owing to His

essential omniscience, knows in 50 AD that Plantinga will climb Mount Rushmore in 2000 AD. That is, if God exists necessarily, (2) does imply (3) and therefore the logical and theological fatalism problems are equivalent.

It is important to notice that one needn't accept that God exists necessarily in order to be committed to (2)'s implying (3). All that one needs to accept to be committed to (2)'s implying (3) is that God exists in every world in which Plantinga exists (more generally: that God exists in every world in which free creatures exist; perhaps freedom is God's and God's alone to give). One can accept this proposition while consistently holding that God's existence is metaphysically contingent. But one who accepts this proposition is committed to the view that (2) implies (3) and therefore to the equivalence of theological and logical fatalism.

The question of whether (2) implies (3), and with it the question of whether or not the problems of logical and theological fatalism are equivalent, then, seems to depend on further questions about the nature of God and His relation to free creatures. We therefore offer the following diagnosis of the disagreement over the relative difficulties of the problems of logical and theological fatalism. Philosophers like Craig, Taylor, and Plantinga who accept that the logical and theological problems are equivalent must also accept at least that free creatures exist only in worlds in which God exists (perhaps accepting, as Plantinga explicitly does, that God exists necessarily).<sup>5</sup> Those like Zagzebski, Hasker and Pike, however, who deny that the fatalism problems are equivalent, must deny that God exists in all worlds in which free creatures exist and must of course deny that God exists necessarily.<sup>6</sup> The disagreement among these philosophers over the relative difficulty of the two fatalism problems thus reduces to more fundamental disagreements over these issues concerning God's existence and relation to free creatures.

We have argued that the question of whether or not theological fatalism is a harder problem than logical fatalism reduces to more fundamental issues about God's existence and relation to free creatures. We have not, however, considered the primary reason that those philosophers who think that the theological problem is more difficult have offered on behalf of their position. These philosophers claim that an inspection of the standard arguments for theological and logical fatalism reveals that the theological problem is the more difficult of the two.<sup>7</sup> We will now examine this line of reasoning and show that it in no way threatens the cogency of our diagnosis of the fatalism controversy.

Consider the following initially plausible standard argument for theological fatalism:<sup>8</sup>

#### AN ARGUMENT FOR THEOLOGICAL FATALISM

- TP1. Plantinga has no choice about the fact that God knew in 50 AD that Plantinga will climb Mount Rushmore in 2000 AD.
- TP2. Necessarily, if God knew in 50 AD that Plantinga will climb Mount Rushmore in 2000 AD then Plantinga will climb Mount Rushmore in 2000 AD.
- TC1. So, Plantinga has no choice about climbing Mount Rushmore in 2000 AD.

The first premise of this argument is intuitively supported by the claim that God's past beliefs are a part of the fixed past and that there is nothing that Plantinga can do to alter the fixed past. The argument's second premise is a clear necessary truth and the conclusion seems to follow from the premises of the argument by the plausibly valid rule of inference asserting that if an agent has no choice about a proposition then that agent has no choice about any logical consequence of that proposition.

Contrast this plausible argument for theological fatalism with the following standard argument for logical fatalism:

#### AN ARGUMENT FOR LOGICAL FATALISM

- LP1. It was true in 50 AD that Plantinga will climb Mount Rushmore in 2000 AD.
- LP2. Necessarily, if it was true in 50 AD that Plantinga will climb Mount Rushmore in 2000 AD then Plantinga will climb Mount Rushmore in 2000 AD.
- LC1. So, Plantinga has no choice about climbing Mount Rushmore in 2000 AD.

The theological argument appears to be much stronger than the logical argument because there seems to be no plausibly valid inference rule that sanctions the inference from the premises to (LC1): notice that the "no choice" locution appears *only* in the conclusion of the logical argument while it figures in both a premise (TP1) and the conclusion of the theological argument. Moreover, as many have pointed out, replacing the first premise of the logical argument with

- LP1'. Plantinga has no choice about the fact that it was true in 50 AD that Plantinga will climb Mount Rushmore in 2000 AD.

does not seem to help the logical fatalist. For while the modified argument is of the same plausibly valid logical form as the standard theological fatalism argument, (LP1') seems far less plausible than the corresponding premise, (TP1), of the theological argument. While (TP1) is intuitively supported by an appeal to the fixity of the past, (LP1') is not.<sup>9</sup>

Though we grant that the standard theological argument has certain merits that the standard logical argument lacks, we think that it is a mistake to conclude from this that the theological problem is more difficult than the logical problem. The fact that one argument for theological fatalism appears stronger than one argument for logical fatalism certainly does not show that theological fatalism is a more difficult problem than logical fatalism. To demonstrate *this* claim one must do more than simply demonstrate that one argument for logical fatalism appears weaker than a similar argument for theological fatalism. If one hopes to show that the theological problem is more difficult than the logical problem, one must show that the consistency of (1) and (2), the propositions the logical fatalist claims are incompatible, is compatible with the inconsistency of (1) and (3), the propositions the theological fatalist claims are incompatible. Pointing out that one argument for the incompatibility of

(1) and (3) is more plausible than a similar argument for the incompatibility of (1) and (2) simply does not support the position that the theological problem is more difficult than the logical problem.<sup>10</sup>

Our diagnosis of the disagreement over the relative strengths of logical and theological fatalism survives this examination of the standard arguments for each position. Our diagnosis also goes a long way towards explaining the ongoing controversy (especially among theistically inclined philosophers) over the relation between the two kinds of fatalism. It is not unusual to find widespread disagreement over an issue that depends for its resolution on the resolution of a particularly contentious issue (the issue concerning the modal status of God's existence, or similarly, the issue concerning God's relation to the existence of free creatures). The fact that these issues concerning the modal status of God's existence bear on the fatalism controversy has, for the most part, gone unnoticed.<sup>11</sup> We claim that this at least partially explains the ongoing controversy over the relation between the two kinds of fatalism.<sup>12</sup>

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#### NOTES

1. For one example among many see Richard Taylor, "Fatalism," *The Philosophical Review* 71, 1962, 56-66.

2. See, for example, William Hasker, *God, Time, and Knowledge*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1989 and Nelson Pike, "Divine Omniscience and Voluntary Action," *The Philosophical Review* 74, 27-46. Following the standard literature we take "God" to be a rigid designator and accept that God is omniscient in any possible world in which He exists.

3. See William Lange Craig, *The Only Wise God*, Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, 1987, page 67, Richard Taylor, "Fatalism," page 57, and Alvin Plantinga, "On Ockham's Way Out," *Faith and Philosophy* 3, 235-269. Several philosophers (for example, William Craig and Linda Zagzebski) attribute this position to Susan Haack and cite Haack's "On a Theological Argument for Fatalism," *The Philosophical Quarterly* 24, 1974, 156-159, in which Haack at least seems to take this position (but see page 158). These philosophers apparently fail to notice Haack's further clarification of her position in "On 'On Theological Fatalism Again' Again," *The Philosophical Quarterly* 25, 159-161 (see especially page 161).

4. Linda Zagzebski, *The Dilemma of Freedom and Foreknowledge*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1991, page 14. See also Hasker, *God, Time, and Knowledge*, pages 76-77, and Pike, "Divine Omniscience and Voluntary Action," pages 70-71 in the version reprinted in John Martin Fischer's anthology *God, Foreknowledge, and Freedom* (Stanford University Press, 1989). Fischer also takes this position in the introduction to *God, Foreknowledge, and Freedom*. See also Pike's "A Latter-Day Look at the Foreknowledge Problem," *International Journal of Philosophy of Religion* 33, 1993, 129-164 (especially pages 136-140).

5. Theistic philosophers accepting either of these metaphysical entailments have a particularly strong response to the theological fatalist available to them. These philosophers can simply point to any refutation of logical fatalism (consistent with their metaphysical views) and point out that their

metaphysical views imply the equivalence of logical and theological fatalism. See Ted A. Warfield, "Divine Foreknowledge and Human Freedom are Compatible," *Nous* 31, 1997, 80-86 for a development of this response.

6. Assuming that these philosophers hold a standard view of omniscience, if any of them were to accept that God exists necessarily (or exists in any world in which free creatures exist), his or her overall position connecting God's existence to the foreknowledge problem would be inconsistent.

7. To give just three examples, Fischer (in "Introduction: God and Freedom" in Fischer's *God, Foreknowledge, and Freedom*), Zagzebski (in *The Dilemma of Freedom and Foreknowledge*) and David Widerker (in "Two Forms of Fatalism" reprinted in Fischer's *God, Foreknowledge, and Freedom*) seem to reason in this way.

8. We take John Martin Fischer's "Introduction: God and Freedom" in Fischer's *God, Foreknowledge, and Freedom* as a standard introduction to both problems and model our quick presentation of these arguments on the more detailed discussion and presentation on pages 3-14 of Fischer's helpful essay.

9. Propositions expressing God's past beliefs (propositions like (TP1)) are at least plausibly thought to be a part of the "hard" or fixed past while propositions expressing only the past truth of future tensed propositions are not as plausibly thought to be a part of the fixed past. See Fischer's *God, Foreknowledge, and Freedom* for many of the most important articles on the fixity of the past and the hard/soft fact distinction.

10. Notice, for example, that one committed to God's necessary existence is committed to God's knowing in 50 AD that Plantinga will climb Mount Rushmore in 2000 AD in any world in which it is true that Plantinga will so climb. Such a philosopher is committed, then, to the logical equivalence of (TP1) and (LP1'). This shows how such a philosopher committed to God's necessary existence could "convert" the weak looking standard argument for logical fatalism into an argument for that position that looks exactly as strong as the corresponding standard argument for theological fatalism.

The general point here is a simple one. If a proposition expressing the inconsistency of (1) and (3) is strictly equivalent to a proposition expressing the inconsistency of (1) and (2) then (regardless of the intensions of the propositions in question) *any* argument for the conclusion that (1) and (3) are incompatible could, in one simple step, be "converted" into an argument for the incompatibility of (1) and (2). So the fact that one such argument might strike one as stronger than the other is irrelevant to the logic and metaphysics of the matter.

11. Plantinga seems to be aware of this relevance (see "On Ockham's Way Out," pages 195-196 in the version in Fischer's *God, Foreknowledge, and Freedom*) and so does Warfield (see "Divine Foreknowledge and Human Freedom are Compatible," pages 81-82). But, most importantly, the philosophers claiming that theological fatalism is a harder problem than logical fatalism do not seem to notice this relevance.

12. We thank Tom Flint for helpful discussion and the Editor and referees of *Faith and Philosophy* for helpful comments.