

Fatalism

1. Fatalism: Fatalism is often distinguished from determinism as follows:

Determinism: All events are wholly determined by their causes.

Fatalism: Some events are unavoidable no matter what.

Richard Taylor takes issue with this definition of Fatalism. For instance, imagine that one of the supposedly unavoidable events is that you will die in an airplane crash tomorrow. Surely, this event is not unavoidable NO MATTER WHAT. For, surely it would not occur if you do not ride in an airplane tomorrow. So, this event is not unavoidable NO MATTER WHAT you do. That is absurd. Fatalism, Taylor says, is really the following view:

Fatalism: All events are, and always have been, unavoidable.

2. The Fixity of the Past: Why would someone accept fatalism? It may help to consider how you view the past: It has happened. There is a set course of events that have occurred—and we have no difficulty accepting that there is nothing we can do about it. There is a fixed set of facts about the past, already laid down. It is SETTLED. We are never tempted to try to change it, because we recognize that we CAN'T.

The fatalist says that the future is ALSO like that. The future is a set course of events that WILL occur—and there is nothing we can do about it. There is a fixed set of facts about the future, already laid down. It is SETTLED. We cannot change it.

The fact is that you ALREADY believe that a LOT of future events are unavoidable. The Sun will rise tomorrow, the tides of the ocean will ebb and flow, the seasons will change (summer will follow spring, and autumn will follow summer), and you will someday die. ...And there is nothing you can do to change these things.

It is true that you do not KNOW the future as well as you know the past. But, really, this should not affect our confidence that the future is FIXED. For instance, when you meet someone, you might only KNOW with confidence a few simple things about their past; for instance, that they had a mother and father, that they were once a toddler, that there was a time at which they could not walk or talk, etc. But, MOST of their past is unknown to you—and yet, it never occurs to you that because of this lack of knowledge that their past is not FIXED, or SETTLED. The future, Taylor says, is no different.

3. The Story of Osmo: But, how in the heck is there already a fixed set of facts about the future? It hasn't happened yet! Taylor answers by way of a story, [The Story of Osmo](#).

Imagine that there is an omniscient God. To be omniscient is to be ALL-knowing; that is, to know EVERYTHING, including facts about the future. If God KNOWS the future, then he cannot be mistaken. If he KNOWS that you will buy an ice cream cone next Saturday, then it is already TRUE that you will buy an ice cream cone next Saturday. Now consider:

The Story of Osmo: God exists and is omniscient. He decides to speak to a scribe in a vision, and dictates to this scribe the details of the life of a man named Osmo. The scribe writes down everything that is told to him, and publishes it in a book called *The Life of Osmo*. Years later, Osmo happens to find this book, and looks inside because it has his name on the cover. To his astonishment, the book describes in great detail the events of his own life! There is one chapter devoted to each year of his life. Osmo, 26 years old at the time, even reads in chapter 26 a passage which describes Osmo finding and reading this very book! Then, Osmo realizes that the book only has 3 more chapters (29 in all). He flips to the end of the book to find out why. There, the book describes Osmo dying in a plane crash in Fort Wayne. "Hmm," Osmo thinks. "I'll have to make sure to never take a flight to Fort Wayne when I'm 29." Three years later, on a flight to St. Paul, the pilot suddenly announces to the passengers that they are being re-routed to Fort Wayne. Panicking, Osmo tries to hijack the plane to prevent the plane from heading there. In the panic, the plane crashes and he dies.

Let's ask four questions, inspired by Taylor's. If you were Osmo, as the plane crashed...

(1) *Would you believe that fatalism is true?*

Answer: Yes.

(2) *Why?*

Answer: Because you would have come to believe that there had, for your whole life, already existed a set of true statements (i.e., facts) about your entire future.

(3) *Would your belief be justified? (i.e., would you have good reason for believing?)*

Answer: Yes. You saw those statements with your own eyes, and it turned out that they were all true, and unavoidable.

(4) *Was fatalism really true in Osmo's story?*

Answer: Yes. There really did exist, since before his birth, a complete set of statements about his entire life, which were all true and unavoidable.

Note: But, what was required in order for fatalism to be true for Osmo? Did Osmo need to BELIEVE that fatalism was true? No. Did he need to have good REASONS for believing that it was true? No. Did the true statements about his future even need to be WRITTEN DOWN in a book for someone to see with their own eyes? No. All that was required was that **there existed a set of true statements about his life**. And Richard Taylor argues that this was true, not just for Osmo, but it is true for YOU as well!

4. Truth Values of Propositions: Why is Taylor convinced that the claim above is true for everyone—not just Osmo? That is, why does he think that there IS a set of true propositions about the past, present, AND the future? Let's take a look.

A proposition is a statement. It ASSERTS something; e.g., <Richmond is in Virginia>, <There is a table in front of me>, <I just saw a unicorn>, <The moon is made of cheese>, etc. All propositions have a truth-value: That is, they are either TRUE, or they are FALSE. (The first 2 propositions above are true, while the latter 2, sadly, are false.)

Every meaningful statement is either **true** or **false**. Put slightly differently, every proposition is either true, or its negation is. There is no in-between. This is called the law of excluded middle:

The Law of Excluded Middle: Every proposition is either true, or its negation is. That is, necessarily, "Either P or not-P" is true.

For instance, the following statements are all true:

<Richmond is in Virginia> <It is not the case that I just saw a unicorn>
<There is a table in front of me> <It is not the case that the moon is made of cheese>

But, then, one of the following true propositions is presently true!

<Chad dies in a plane crash on July 14th, 2027>
<It is not the case that Chad dies in a plane crash on July 14th, 2027>

We may not KNOW which one of them is true—but one of them IS! And the other is false. So, we may conclude that there IS a set of true propositions, not only about the past and the present, but also about the future. Therefore, fatalism is true.

Sure, we would be more likely to BELIEVE fatalism if we saw them written down like Osmo did. But, they do not need to be written down in order to be true. Having them written down only helps us to KNOW them. But, they are true regardless.

5. Solutions: There are a number of ways in which we might reply to Taylor's position:

- (a) **Solution 1: Propositions About the Future Have No Truth Value:** The future is NOT settled. For instance, at present, it is neither true nor false that I will die in a plane crash in 2027. <Chad dies in a plane crash on July 14, 2027> BECOMES true or false once 7/14/2027 arrives in the present. Before then, it lacks a truth value.

Reply: This solution denies the Law of Excluded Middle. A proposition CANNOT be neither true nor false, unless we want to reject this axiom, one of the most fundamental truths of all of logic.

[It may help to imagine that you and a friend are at a restaurant. You say, "The following is true: I am going to order a burger." Later, you order a burger and say, "See? I was right?" But, your friend endorses Solution 1, and says, "Actually, you were wrong. For, at the time, your statement was neither true nor false—but, you mistakenly asserted that it was true." How absurd!]

Furthermore, how and when does a proposition BECOME true? It is unclear in many cases. For instance, consider <Oswald killed JFK>. Does this "become" true when Oswald pulls the trigger? When the bullet hits Kennedy? When Kennedy died 30 minutes later? The answer is vague. It is strange to think that there is no definite point at which a proposition becomes true. Is the proposition without truth-value, and then SORT OF true, and then MORE true, and then TOTALLY true? That seems mistaken. A proposition is either true or it isn't.

- (b) **Solution 2: Propositions About the Future are Disjunctive Truths:** Perhaps propositions about the future DO have truth values. They are TRUE, but only in disjunctive form. For instance, surely we CAN know in advance that the following proposition is true: <Either Chad dies in a plane crash on 7/14/2027, or he does not>. Such "either-or" statements are called disjunctions.

Reply: In order for a disjunction (e.g., "Either A or B") to be true, one of its disjuncts must be true. That is, "Either A or B" is true iff either "A" is true, or "B" is true.

[Imagine I say that "Either Anne or Brett was at the party." Then you ask, "Was Anne there?" No, I reply. "Was Brett there?" No, I reply again. That's impossible! The either-or statement can only be true if Anne WAS at the party, or if Brett WAS at the party (or both). It simply cannot be true if neither disjunct is true. The disjunction is only true when one (or both) of its DISJUNCTS is true.]

In short, the only way that <Either Chad dies in a plane crash on 7/14/2027, or he does not> can be PRESENTLY true is if one of its disjuncts is PRESENTLY true. That is, one of the following two propositions must be PRESENTLY true:

<Chad dies in a plane crash on 7/14/2027>

<It is not the case that Chad dies in a plane crash on 7/14/2027>

But, then, there must be some true propositions about the future that are NOT disjunctive, and we are back to square one.

- (c) **Solution 3: Propositions About the Future are True, but Contingent:** Perhaps there IS a set of truths about the future. But, the fact that they are true does not mean that they are unavoidable—i.e., NECESSARILY true. That is, the fact that something is true does not entail that it MUST be true.

For instance, it is true that you applied to the College of William & Mary. This is true—and there is nothing you can do to change that. But, you COULD have NOT applied; that is, not applying was within your power. So, here is an example of a truth about some choice that you made which is presently both true and unalterable—and yet, this doesn't seem to entail that you couldn't have done otherwise, or that you didn't make this choice FREELY.

Similarly, perhaps it makes sense to say that, even if it is presently true and unchangeable that you are going to eat ice cream this Saturday, you will still do so freely. You COULD fail to do so—it is just that, you in fact WON'T.

Reply: If it is presently TRUE that you WILL eat ice cream this Saturday, and this fact is unalterable, in what sense are we saying that you "could" do otherwise? Sure, your muscles are such that, IF YOU DID use them to walk away from the ice cream shop, then you wouldn't buy an ice cream cone. But, in fact you WON'T use your muscles in this way. So, in what sense do you REALLY have the ability to refrain from buying the ice cream? In what sense do you "freely" buy the ice cream if it is already set that you certainly will NOT use your "freedom" to refrain from doing so? To Taylor, this claim makes no sense. [Do you agree?]

6. The Argument: We may summarize Taylor's argument for fatalism as follows:

The Argument for Fatalism

1. *The Law of Excluded Middle*: For every proposition, $\langle P \rangle$, either $\langle P \rangle$ is true, or its denial, $\langle \text{Not-}P \rangle$, is true.
2. By LEM: Therefore, one of the following propositions is presently true:
 - (a) $\langle \text{You will eat ice cream tomorrow} \rangle$
 - (b) $\langle \text{It is not the case that you will eat ice cream tomorrow} \rangle$

In short, there is presently a fact of the matter about what you will do tomorrow.

3. If (a) is true, then (a) is unavoidable (i.e., you will in fact eat ice cream tomorrow), and if (b) is true, then (b) is unavoidable.
4. This is generalizable to any proposition about the future; i.e., general fatalism about the future is true, such that there is presently a fact of the matter about everything you will ever do, down to the last detail. In short, your entire future is already settled; it is entirely fixed and unavoidable.