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CHAPTER 2

Fatalism

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Introduction

Open possibilities are open to choice or chance. This status matters to us. We are hopeful about the positive possibilities. We worry about the threatening ones. We take an open possibility to be unsettled, up-in-the-air.

In contrast, fated things are out of anyone's control, bound to be. This status matters differently to us. If something fated looks bad, we try to resign ourselves to it. If something fated looks good, we are glad about it. We take anything fated to be a given.

Some philosophers have tried to prove that all of reality—everything that ever happens, every entity that ever exists, and every condition that things are ever in—all was forever fated to be as it is. This is the doctrine of **metaphysical fatalism**.

There are several things to set aside right away, because metaphysical fatalism does not say or imply that they are true. First, metaphysical fatalism is not about being fated by the Fates. The Fates are three ancient Greek mythical goddesses who were believed to decide human destiny. No philosopher thinks that those goddesses exist and determine our lives. Philosophers agree that nothing is fated by the Fates.

Metaphysical fatalism says that there is a kind of necessity to every actual thing. This does not imply that ‘everything happens for a reason’. Metaphysical fatalism is about an impersonal necessity, not a reason or purpose. Also, metaphysical fatalism does not imply that we have a destiny where certain things would have to happen to us, no matter what else was to happen. Rather, it implies that our fate is to be exactly as we are, in exactly the situations that we are actually in. Furthermore, this fatalism does *not* imply that effort is futile. It allows that some efforts cause improvements—although it does imply that both the efforts and the resulting improvements were fated. Fatalists acknowledge that we do not always *know* what is going to happen. They say that it is all fated, regardless of what anyone knows about what will be.

Moreover, metaphysical fatalism does not tell us to be ‘fatalistic’, that is, to regard the future with resignation or submission to fate. No particular attitude is automatically justified. Fatalism even allows a cheerful optimism to be justified—maybe things are fated to go well and attitudes of resignation and submission do no good.

Finally, the necessity that metaphysical fatalists attribute to everything is not the necessity of causes to produce their effects. Clearly, many things are determined in advance by physical laws and prior conditions. If everything that ever happens is determined in this way, then what philosophers call **determinism** is true.¹ The melting of some ice that is heated above water’s freezing point is inevitable. This seems enough to say that the heating makes the melting ‘fated’ to occur. But the truth of determinism would not be even partial support for metaphysical fatalism. Fatalism is not about being physically or causally determined. It is about something more abstract, something that does not depend on how things go in nature. Determinists hold that the present and future are causally determined by the past and the physical laws, but there could have been a different past or

¹ For more about determinism, see ‘Free Will and Determinism’, Chapter 6.

different laws. The metaphysical fatalists' view is that, even if determinism is not true, there are no open possibilities at any point in history. Their claim is that each thing in the past, present, and future has always been fixed and settled, whether or not it was causally determined.

Metaphysical fatalists think that the sheer presence of anything in the world gives the thing a necessity. Why? Fatalists present **arguments**—lines of reasoning—to try to prove their thesis. Let's look at some main fatalist arguments and see how well they work.

The Sea Battle

The ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle gives us our first argument. Here is a short story about some predictions.

A sea battle may well take place tomorrow. Today, someone predicts that it will happen tomorrow and someone else predicts that it won't. Neither of the predictors knows what is going to happen. They are both just guessing.

That is the whole story. It is not a work of art. But our Aristotelian fatalist uses it to argue for something profound.

The Sea Battle argument begins as follows.

First Assumption: Either the prediction that the battle will happen is true, or the prediction that it won't happen is true.

This First Assumption seems sensible, although it will not go unchallenged. Let's continue with the reasoning.

Second Assumption: If a statement is true, then it has to be true.

This too initially seems right, though again we'll think more about it. From these two assumptions the fatalist derives the following.

Initial Conclusion: Whichever prediction about the battle is true, it has to be true.

If a prediction *has to be* true, then it describes a necessary fact. So now the fatalist derives this.

Second Conclusion: Whether or not a battle will take place at sea tomorrow, whichever will happen is something that has to be—it is necessary.

This conclusion is fatalistic. And there is more to come. So far, the Sea Battle argument is just about one predicted event. Metaphysical fatalism is about everything. A conclusion about everything can be reached by generalizing from the reasoning about the sea battle. Nothing in the story makes its battle especially prone to having the status of being settled in advance. So, to the extent that the argument about the battle succeeds, an unrestricted conclusion about everything else seems to be equally well supported.

One less-than-universal aspect of the story is that predictions have been made. That seems not to be crucial, though. The argument does not use the predicting as a basis for inferring the necessity of what is predicted. If the argument succeeds, then it would be *the reality of the situation* that makes the predicted fact necessary, not the predicting of it. Thus, the whole truth about the future would be necessary, whether predicted or not. So it looks as though, if the fatalist succeeds in proving the Second Conclusion, then there is no real further obstacle to proving the following.

General Fatalistic Conclusion: Whatever will be, has to be.

Before evaluating the Sea Battle argument, we should note two further things about it. First, battling involves choice. Frequently, fatalism is regarded as being about our having freedom of choice. Choice is an important focus for fatalistic arguments, because choices are some of our favorite examples of open possibilities.

We think that there are free choices that really could have gone either way.² But the fatalists' conclusion is not limited to excluding freedom of choice. The General Fatalistic Conclusion asserts that the whole future is necessary. If this conclusion is right, then it applies as well to the things that are supposed to be matters of chance according to science. For instance, according to contemporary physics, the time of the radioactive decay of a uranium atom is not physically determined. Two uranium atoms can be in exactly the same physical condition until one decays and the other does not. Yet the Sea Battle sort of argument applies here just as well. Consider two predictive statements made before noon, one saying that some particular uranium atom will decay at noon and the other denying that the atom will decay at noon. The rest of the Sea Battle argument transfers over to the example. We get the fatalistic conclusion that the state of the atom at noon, whether decayed or not, has to be.

The General Fatalistic Conclusion is only about the future. Full-blown metaphysical fatalism is about everything, past, present, and future. This is not an obstacle to fatalism, though. The Sea Battle argument reaching the General Fatalistic Conclusion about the future does all of the hard work. The past and present are easy for the fatalist to deal with. It is quite plausible that the past is just as the fatalist says it is—the whole past is fixed and settled. The same goes for the present. If anything is in some condition at present, then the thing's current condition is fixed and settled. The present is too late to do anything about the present!

Thus, past and present look ripe for fatalism. If the Sea Battle argument shows that the future is fixed and settled too, then the way seems clear for a final comprehensive fatalist conclusion: there are no open possibilities at all at any time.

² 'Free Will and Determinism', chapter 6, is about this.

Objections

Arguments rely on their assumptions. If an argument has a premise that is obviously untrue, then the argument is definitely a failure. Arguments that are taken seriously in metaphysics are seldom that bad. If one strikes us that way, we should strongly suspect that we have not understood it. Arguments can fail less conclusively, though. Another thing that keeps an argument from proving its conclusion is the existence of an unresolved doubt about a premise. Raising doubts about premises is how the Sea Battle argument is most often faulted. Let's see how well the premises stand scrutiny.

Some philosophers have objected to the Sea Battle argument's First Assumption, the premise saying that one of the two predictions about the battle is true in advance. This assumption is one version of a principle known as the **Law of the Excluded Middle (LEM)**. Our version excludes any middle ground between the truth of a statement and the truth of its denial.

LEM. Concerning any statement, either it is true or its denial is true.

At least at first, LEM appears irresistible. How could a statement be untrue while the statement denying that it was true—its denial—was untrue too? That would seem to require an unfathomable 'reality gap'—an intermediate condition between being and not being. And this could not be like a ghostly haze, since a ghostly haze is a way of being! Yet some philosophers have opposed the Sea Battle argument by arguing against LEM. They have contended that LEM applies only to statements that assert *settled* facts, such as statements about what has already happened. The critics say that other statements, like ones about a potential sea battle that may or may not take place, have no truth yet. The prediction that the battle will occur is not now true, and neither is its denial, because nothing that exists right now

makes either one true. Both predictions are presently indeterminate rather than true. The critics conclude that LEM is false.

This criticism has a serious drawback. Suppose that Alice predicted yesterday, 'There will be a thunderstorm in Cleveland tomorrow', and in fact there is a thunderstorm in Cleveland today. It is only natural to think that Alice got it right *yesterday*. This means that what Alice said was already true when she said it. Maybe at the time no one *knew* whether or not it was true. Maybe at the time its truth was *unsettled*. Still, when we do find out about the storm today, we say that her prediction *was* correct. If so, then the prediction was not indeterminate yesterday after all. This seems to apply to predictive statements quite generally. If the future bears them out, then we regard what they say of the future as having been true when they were still predictions. The objection to the LEM denies that they were true in advance. So the objection is in trouble.

An opponent of LEM might be unimpressed. An opponent might first repeat the point that when a predicted event is not now a settled fact, there is nothing around now to *make* the prediction true. The opponent could then add that any statement is true only if something makes it true. Conceding that people *regard* these predictions as having been true when made, the opponent might insist that this need for a truth-maker shows that the predictions couldn't have *been* true in advance. This restores the conclusion that LEM is wrong about them.

Though this criticism is reasonable, there is a good reply. The reply is that, because predictions are *about* the future, what makes them true or untrue is *in* the future, not in the present. There does not have to be anything around *now* to make them true. In fact, now is too early. So long as things turn out in the future as predicted, then the predictions are made true now by those later developments. The truth-makers for accurate predictions are in the future, right where they belong.

LEM is looking difficult to refute. Other critics of the Sea Battle argument focus on its Second Assumption: if any statement is true, then it has to be true. The classic objection to this assumption begins by observing that the assumption has more than one meaning. The critics say that on the interpretation of its meaning where the assumption is correct, it does not help the argument. On the interpretation where it helps, it is not correct. Specifically, the assumption is correct if it means this.

SA_I: It has to be that if a statement is true, then the statement is true.

SA_I is impeccable. But it says only that the following conditional claim has to be correct: if a statement is true, then it is true. This conditional claim is truly trivial. It says only that a statement is true if it's true. SA_I does not tell us that any statement *has to be* true if it's true. Compare: If a wall is red, then it's red. That is a necessary fact. It applies to all walls, including a formerly brown wall that was just painted red. Yet it surely does not tell us that the wall *has to be* red. Of course the wall doesn't have to be red—it was recently brown!

Likewise, the conditional claim—a statement is true if it's true—asserts a necessary fact. But it does not tell us that being *true* is all it takes for a statement to *have to be* true. Yet that is precisely what the Sea Battle needs to derive its conclusion—it needs true statements thereby *having to be* true. Looking back at the reasoning, we see that the argument uses the Second Assumption to draw the initial conclusion that there are predictions that *have to be* true. If any assumption brings into the argument this necessity for predictions, it is the Second Assumption, the one that we are now interpreting as SA_I. Since SA_I does not bring in any such necessity, the argument's initial conclusion just does not follow logically if the argument uses SA_I.

The Sea Battle argument does get what it needs for its initial conclusion to follow logically if the following interpretation of the Second Assumption is part of the argument.

SA2: If a statement is true, then that statement has to be true.

SA2 does say that being true is enough for a statement to be necessary. So SA2 asserts the necessity of true predictions that the Sea Battle argument needs. But why believe SA2? To all appearances, some truths are **contingent**, that is, they are actually true but they need not have been true. We think that any lucky guess about something in the future that is not now settled is actually true, but not necessary. The truth of the guess derives from the occurrence later of what was guessed to happen. Yet SA2 says that even those lucky guesses about the apparently unsettled future would state necessary facts. SA2 says that just being true is enough to make any truth have to be true.

For us to find SA2 credible, we would have to find something about just being true that brings with it necessary truth. Nothing comes to mind. Being true by itself seems to allow that some things just happen to be true. The only temptation to think otherwise is a deception. We can be deceived by confusing SA2 with SA1. When we keep our minds clear of that confusion, though, SA2 is not reasonable to believe. Thus, either way we interpret the Second Assumption in the Sea Battle argument, the argument looks flawed at that point.

Past Predictions

The Sea Battle argument tries to use present truth to secure future necessity. We have seen that present truths may instead be secured by how the future happens to turn out. But what if

something in the *past* guaranteed a specific future? After all, we are confident that once things are in the past, they are unalterable. So if the past secures the future, then the future is now necessitated.

Metaphysical fatalism has been defended on the basis of the claim that the truth about everything, including the future, already *existed* in the past. By virtue of existing in the past, this comprehensive truth is a fixed fact. This status of being settled in virtue of being past is sometimes called **accidental necessity**. The word ‘accidental’ here signifies that the fixity of the past is not absolutely necessary. There might have been a wholly different past instead. But once things are in the actual past, they do seem fixed and settled. So this is an ‘accidental’ sort of necessity. We think that the future is not likewise settled, at least not all of it. Choices and chance developments seem open, with some potential to develop in different ways. The Past Predictions argument seeks to show that the accidental necessity of the past carries over to the whole future.

A bit of philosophical terminology will be useful. The substance of a statement is what philosophers call a **proposition**. A proposition is what is said in a statement; it is the thought behind the words. Translations of the statement into another language aim to capture the same proposition in other words. Propositions are what we believe and otherwise think about when truth is at stake. If I predict that many good deeds will be done tomorrow, then the prediction is the proposition that many good deeds will be done tomorrow. If you hope that many good deeds will be done tomorrow, then this hope of yours has as its content the same proposition as my prediction.

These are propositions, *if* there really are any such entities. The existence of propositions is controversial among philosophers (as is the existence of everything else!) In any case, with the term ‘proposition’ understood in this way we are ready for the Past Predictions argument.

First Assumption: For any way that things will be in the future, there existed in the past a true proposition to the effect that things would be that way.

The first assumption is about propositions that are contents of *available* predictions. It is not limited to the predictions that anyone has actually made. It says that the contents of all available true predictions existed in the past, whether or not anyone ever stated the predictions by asserting the propositions. The assumption says that an accurate prediction was always there to be made.

The First Assumption will be critically discussed soon.

Second Assumption: Every aspect of the past is accidentally necessary.

This Second Assumption needs investigating. Clearly, everything we ordinarily regard as being in the past is fixed and settled—accidentally necessary. The second assumption goes beyond that, though, to claim that every last detail of the past of any sort is accidentally necessary. We'll look into that.

Preliminary Fatalistic Conclusion: The truth in the past of each true predictive proposition is accidentally necessary.

If the truth of predictive propositions about everything in the future is accidentally necessary, then that locks in the whole future. So we have arrived at this.

General Fatalistic Conclusion: the future in every detail is accidentally necessary.

Both assumptions of the Past Predictions argument are questionable. It is easy to have doubts about the existence of the countless unstated propositions that are required by the First Assumption. Does everything about the future correspond to some predictive proposition that *existed* in the past? Certainly, almost none of

those predictions is ever actually *made* by anyone. Why think that the unstated predictive propositions exist?

An adequate investigation of the existence of propositions would take an extensive metaphysical inquiry. Though it would be terrifically interesting, it would be a very long digression here. Fortunately, we need not investigate this in order to appreciate the core of the Past Predictions reasoning. The argument would reach an impressive fatalistic conclusion even if it were scaled back to actual predictions so as to avoid this issue. People have actually predicted the sorts of things that we think remain open to future resolution. Some predictions have been made about apparently open choices. People have managed to predict—if only by luck—what someone later chose with all apparent freedom. Some accurate predictions have been made about other apparently open possibilities, such as the radioactive decay of a particle. The rest of the Past Predictions argument tells us that at least the actually predicted future outcomes have the accidental necessity of the corresponding true predictions. That is a fatalistic enough result to be remarkable. Predicted outcomes of these kinds seem to remain open just as much as ones that aren't predicted by anyone. This scaled back version of the argument skips the whole question of the existence of unstated truths. So let's restrict our thinking to actual predictions and proceed.

The Second Assumption of the Past Predictions argument is that every aspect of the past is accidentally necessary. True? When we consider the past, we tend to think of things that are *wholly* in the past: major historical events, our own previous adventures, and other things that are clearly purely in the past. Those are settled aspects of the past. Thinking of them makes the Second Assumption seem right. But what is crucial for the argument is whether certain *other* aspects of the past are in the same boat—the past truth of each true predictive statement.

The predictions have been made. So the past *existence* of the predictions is settled. A prediction's *truth*, though, is not

something that is entirely accounted for by the past. A prediction is about the future. Because of this, if the prediction is true, then future circumstances are what make it true. This is just another way to say that things in the future settle the truth of the prediction. So, as long as some future things are currently unsettled, the truth of their past prediction is unsettled as well. It is reasonable for us to believe that some of the future remains open. We have just seen that, if this is so, then the truth of predictions about those aspects of the future remains unsettled too. Thus, it now looks as though the Past Predictions argument runs into trouble that is fundamentally the same as the problem for the Sea Battle argument. The problem arises here as the dubious assumption that every aspect of the past is accidentally necessary merely because it is in the past.

Necessary Conditions

I cannot finish off a mile-long run right now. Why? Because I need to have run almost a mile just before now, so that I can complete the running of a mile. Yet I have not been running. So I cannot finish a mile run at this point.

This explanation seems to say that there is a certain necessary condition for my finishing a mile run—my having run almost a mile—and the absence of this condition renders me unable to complete a mile run. The first assumption of our next fatalistic argument says that, quite generally, the absence of a necessary condition for an alternative always closes off the possibility of that alternative.

First Assumption: Something is fixed and unalterable if any necessary condition for not having the thing is absent. (Restated in more positive terms: If something has an open alternative, then all that is needed for the alternative to exist is present.)

This First Assumption merits careful consideration. We'll investigate it after seeing the rest of the reasoning. The other assumption in the Necessary Conditions argument is rationally irresistible. It just says that any condition is needed in order to have that very condition.

Second Assumption: Any condition is a necessary condition for itself.

To appreciate how these two assumptions work together to rule out any open alternatives, let's think about an example. Suppose that Cathy is about to make a choice between accepting a job offer and not accepting it. Suppose that Cathy will choose to accept the offer. Could her not choosing to accept be an open alternative at this point, before she chooses? Well, what conditions would have to hold, in order for Cathy *not* to choose to accept? For Cathy to avoid the choice to accept, at a minimum she would have *not* to choose to accept. In other words, a necessary condition for Cathy not choosing to accept is that very condition itself: *that Cathy will not choose to accept the offer*. As the Second Assumption says, that condition is a non-negotiable necessary condition for itself. Again, it is part of our example that Cathy *will* choose to accept. So a necessary condition of this *not* happening is *absent*, now and forever. The First Assumption of the argument says that when any necessary condition for something not happening is absent, the thing is fixed and unalterable. So it follows from the two assumptions that Cathy's actual choice is already fixed and unalterable before she makes it.

The same reasoning applies equally well to any apparently open possibility, whether or not choice is involved. Concerning any actual thing at any time, some necessary condition for not having that thing is absent—if nothing else, the missing necessary condition is the very condition of not having the thing at the time. So the argument arrives at the following conclusion.

Fully Fatalistic Conclusion. All actual entities, events, and circumstances, past, present, and future, are fixed and unalterable down to the last detail.

To begin a critical examination of the Necessary Conditions argument, let's rethink the explanation presented earlier of why we regard past facts as fixed and unalterable. We observed that my finishing a mile run is not an open possibility at times like now when I haven't been running. We also observed that my having run almost a mile is a necessary condition for my finishing a mile, and that condition is absent. But is the *absence* of a necessary condition really the explanation of why I cannot now finish a mile run? Here is a rival explanation. To finish a mile run now, I'd have to cause different things to have happened prior to now. I'd have somehow to cause it to be the case that I have been running. But as a matter of fact, I *cannot* do anything now that would cause me to have been running, nor can anything else now cause me to have been running.³ This *incapacity* to supply the needed condition is why I can't finish a mile run now.

Once this account is offered, it seems a better explanation. Generally, we regard the events of the past as not subject to any current causal influence. Our confidence in the fixity of the past derives from that.

Even if this is a better account of why we think that past facts are unalterable, so far this is no objection to the core of the Necessary Conditions argument. It is no reason to deny the claim of the First Assumption that something is unalterable when a necessary condition of an alteration is absent. But once we don't need that claim to understand the fixity of the

³ Our chapter about time defends the *possibility* of backward causation. The topic there is whether there *could have been* a reality where causes run backwards in time. Even if such an alternative reality is possible, this does not tell us what causes are *actually available*.

past, we can see that the claim is doubtful on its own. Let's revisit Cathy's choice. We must concede that, whichever choice Cathy makes, some necessary condition of the alternative is *absent*. Does that absence, all by itself, make her stuck with her actual choice? It seems not. She need not be stuck with it, if the missing condition is *available* to her. If she is *able* to supply all missing necessary conditions, then no necessary condition stands in her way.

We have no reason to doubt that Cathy is able to supply the needed conditions. The necessary condition discussed, that of her not choosing to accept the offer, *seems* available as she considers the choice. Maybe there is some hidden reason why it is not really available. But the reason is *not* just that her non-acceptance is a necessary condition, and it is absent. Analogously, the mere absence of, say, a person, doesn't imply that the person is *unavailable*. The person may be ready and waiting to be present. Likewise, we have no good reason to think that the mere absence of a necessary condition for something locks in its unavailability. This undercuts the reasonableness of the First Assumption of the Necessary Conditions argument.

So the argument is in trouble. The mere absence of a necessary condition does not seem to *guarantee* its unavailability. The First Assumption might be defended on another basis. It could be contended that absent necessary conditions never *actually are available*. This would be enough. We would be just as stuck with the actual situation if the necessary conditions for something else were never in fact available. Are they ever available?

Consider this challenge: If there are available alternatives that make for open possibilities, then how come no allegedly open possibility has ever been *realized*? Never once has something true at a time turned into something that was untrue at that very time. No truth was ever actually avoided. So

why think that the makings for such a thing are actually *available*?

In confronting these questions, we should think carefully about what we are denying if we deny that all is fixed and settled. If we say that an actual future truth is not fixed and settled, then we are *not* saying or implying that something true at a time can be made untrue *too*. We are saying, concerning something true in the future, that it has some potential to be untrue *instead*. We are thinking that some truths have an *unrealized* potential to be *just* untrue, *never* true. To defend this thought, we need not directly answer the questions just raised. We need not look for something that has the status of being true at a time and show how it could become *also* untrue or it could *change into* being untrue at the time. Yet the challenge posed by the questions asks us for an example of something true at a time that *realizes* the potential to be untrue at the time. So we need not meet this challenge.

How might we defend our belief in the existence of the potential, if not with the sort of examples that the challenge asks for? We could start by arguing that some future events—maybe choices, maybe physically undetermined events—are not necessitated in any known way. This would include arguing that the fatalists' efforts to prove otherwise fail. Also, we might find evidence that certain pairs of scenarios are duplicates of one another in every way that seems relevant. Yet in one member of the pair, one of our candidates for being an open possibility occurs; in the other member of the pair, the other alternative occurs. If we find such pairs, then in each case the paired duplicate argues that nothing made the one possibility occur rather than the other—it just chanced to happen one way. For instance, two flips of a coin, controlled in every known way to be exact duplicate flips in exact duplicate conditions, might be found to result in the coin landing on different sides. Wouldn't it be most reasonable to say that each flip had a chance to end up the

other way? Finally, we might have a well-confirmed scientific theory that implies that some outcomes remain undetermined until they occur. These are reasons that we can have to think that there are open possibilities.

God Knows

Maybe an all-knowing God exists.⁴ If so, does that make fatalism true too? Metaphysical fatalism might seem to follow readily from the existence of God, using the following argument.

First Assumption: If God knows everything, then God knows in advance all truths about the whole future.

That seems safe, though we shall see that some have objected to it.

Second Assumption: If God knows any given truth about the future, then any potential for that truth to be untrue would be a potential for God to be mistaken about it.

To see what the Second Assumption says, suppose that God knows that a particular flipped coin *will* land heads up. According to the Second Assumption, any potential for the coin *not* to land heads up would be a potential for God to have the mistaken belief that it will land heads up. The heads-up outcome is what God thinks and knows in advance. So if the future turned out the other way, the Second Assumption implies that God would still have this same belief and it would be untrue. We'll soon think more about that assumption.

Final Assumption: It is impossible for God to be mistaken about anything.

⁴ We investigate this in our 'God' chapter.

We can take it for granted that the Final Assumption is correct because that is the sort of God we are considering—a God who is never mistaken under any possible conditions.

Conditionally Fatalistic Conclusion: If God knows everything, then the whole future is fixed and unalterable.

This conclusion does not assert any fatalism. Deriving fatalism about the future would require the added assumption that an all-knowing God does exist. Still, it is interesting enough to consider whether or not the existence of an all-knowing God *implies* that the whole future is fixed.

One line of opposition to the God Knows argument holds that, contrary to the First Assumption, God knows everything without knowing anything in advance. The opponent claims that God is outside of the time in which we exist—that is, the sequential time of before and after, the time of past, present, and future. God exists ‘in eternity’. Eternity is not in sequential time. Eternity is not before, during, or after anything. So God does not know anything ‘in advance’, since this requires existing in time before something happens and knowing that it will happen. God exists in eternity instead. The objection concludes that this allows God to know everything without having any advance knowledge.

Existence outside of past, present, and future is difficult to understand. Whatever such existence amounts to, though, it does not seem to ruin the core of the God Knows argument. The argument essentially relies on God having *exhaustive* knowledge, not *advance* knowledge. To see this, we can replace ‘in advance’ in the argument with ‘in eternity’. To the extent that we can understand the resulting reasoning, it seems to have the same merits as the original. Suppose that God knows in eternity what is in our future—the future relative to us now. If so, then any potential for our future to be otherwise is a potential for

something God knows to be untrue. The God Knows argument tries to persuade us that potential of that sort implies an impossible mistake by God. If the argument succeeds, then we could not avoid the conclusion by locating God in eternity. So this is not a promising source of doubt about the reasoning.

What about the Second Assumption of the God Knows argument? It says that if there is some potential for a true predictive statement not to be true, even though God knows it to be true (in advance or in eternity), then that is a potential for God to make a mistake. This claim is doubtful. Why would God be stuck believing something, whether or not it was true? God's knowledge could be more flexible.

For instance, maybe God knows all by 'seeing' all. Thus, God knows how things will be in our future by perfectly perceiving how things are at later times. Perception of a fact always derives from that fact. So God's perceptual knowledge of future facts derives from the facts perceived. If God knows by perception how our future will be, then God derives from our future complete information about it.

If this is how God's knowledge of our future works, then a potential for things to *be* otherwise in our future would be accompanied by a potential for God to have *perceived* otherwise. The future facts would have been different and God would have perceived them to be facts. Had things been otherwise, God would have derived different future information (in advance or in eternity). God would have known the alternative truths instead of having any mistaken beliefs.

This casts doubt on the Second Assumption of the God Knows argument. It shows us that one sort of knowledge by God of the future, combined with the existence of some potential for an alternative future truth, does *not* imply the possibility of God making a mistake. The combination only implies a

potential for something that is actually known by God to have been untrue—not a potential for it to have been mistakenly believed by God.

A Final Note

None of the arguments for metaphysical fatalism has turned out to seem successful. Nonetheless, a popular fatalistic saying remains appealing: ‘What will be, will be.’ There is no denying that this states a fact. Did we overlook the wisdom here in our search for support for fatalism?

Actually, there is no metaphysical fatalism in the saying. It does not say that anything *has to be*. People do sometimes use these words to express an attitude of resignation toward whatever the future holds. But any good basis for that attitude is something beyond the sheer content of the saying. The fact that it states does not warrant any attitude, fatalistic resignation or otherwise. It claims nothing one way or the other about whether we control the future or whether the future is already settled. It simply says: however things will be, that is how they will be—however they get to be that way. This is not fatalism.

People sometimes take the saying to assert that whatever is *destined* to be, will be. That is not what it literally says, since it does not mention destiny. But people do take it that way. It sounds more fatalistic on this interpretation. It really isn’t, though. It does not say how much of the future is destined, *if any*. Everyone, including those who deny all destiny, can agree that ‘whatever’ is destined, will be. Those who deny all destiny can consistently add that this is an empty truth, because nothing is destined.

‘What will be, will be’ is a good thing to say, for all that. It often comforts people. It just doesn’t give us any reason to accept metaphysical fatalism.

FURTHER READING

This chapter opposes arguments for metaphysical fatalism. The following are a couple of works by defenders of fatalistic arguments. They include arguments that we have discussed. Several editions of a book by Richard Taylor are listed, because his defense of fatalism changes notably in succeeding editions of his book.

Steven M. Cahn, *Fate, Logic and Time* (Ridgeview, 1967).

Richard Taylor, ‘Fate’, in *Metaphysics* (Prentice-Hall, 1963, 1974, 1983, 1992).

An issue with close connections to fatalism is the compatibility of God’s knowledge of our future with our having freedom. Here is a collection of essays about that.

John Martin Fisher (ed.), *God, Foreknowledge, and Freedom* (Stanford, 1989).