

2

WALLACE, FREE CHOICE, AND FATALISM

GILA SHER

In a 2005 commencement address David Foster Wallace extolled the value of “freedom of choice.” But the freedom of choice he extolled was *not* the *freedom to do things in the world*, change the world, build something new in the world. The choice he talked about, the “real freedom,” “the kind that is most precious,” was the *freedom to choose “what to think”* (my italics)—the “total freedom of choice regarding what to think about.” It was the freedom of “choosing to . . . alter . . . or get . . . free of [our] natural, hard-wired default setting,” choosing “what you pay attention to and . . . how you construct meaning from experience,” the freedom *not* to follow your “natural default setting . . . , the automatic way . . . [we] experience . . . adult life.” Specifically, he said, it is “the boring, frustrating, crowded parts of adult life” “where the work of choosing is gonna come in . . . , the traffic jams and crowded aisles and long checkout lines” where you need to “make a conscious decision about how to think and what to pay attention to.” “The only thing that’s capital-T True is that you get to decide how you’re gonna try to see” the “petty, frustrating” stuff in everyday life (Wallace 2005).

Now, of course, for a novelist to see the world in a new way is (potentially) to change the world. But in his 2005 address Wallace focused on how, in order to cope with life, we have to decide

actively to see it in ways that will not let it crush us. As a way of life, this might be viewed as a strand of stoicism, yet theoretically, the view that *we cannot change reality, we can only change the way we think about it is*, in a way, a form of *fatalism*.

Twenty years earlier Wallace, then a senior at Amherst College, wrote an honors thesis (Wallace 1985) about a broader kind of freedom, a freedom that does encompass *doing things in the world*, physically changing the world. Fatalism says that “human beings, agents, have no control over what is going to happen” (144),¹ and Wallace sought to refute a controversial yet hard to unravel argument supporting this position. This argument supported fatalism in a rather unusual way, namely, on general logical and semantic grounds. More specifically, on Wallace’s understanding, it purported to show that “the extension of standard semantic values to tensed propositions” (143) implies fatalism. Wallace, in his essay, contested this claim: “We can allow contingent future-tensed propositions to take standard truth-values without doing violence to our belief that parts of the universe enjoy at least some degree of causal contingency and that persons enjoy at least some control over what does and will happen to them” (142). The latter belief Wallace holds to be true: “It is not at all the case that [an agent] ‘can never do anything he does not do.’ . . . This fact seems to me completely and obviously true” (209).

In discussing Wallace’s essay I will treat it not as an undergraduate thesis but as a philosophical work in its own right. This attitude is justified not just for the purpose of the present volume; the essay itself calls for this attitude. In fact, the essay offers such a thorough treatment of the questions involved that it sets a new standard for a future defense of Taylor’s argument. Or so I will suggest. My goal in this paper is to reconstruct Wallace’s critique of Taylor’s argument for fatalism in a clear and concise way, so that it is easy to see its main line of reasoning and potential power. In so doing I will be selective in reporting Wallace’s views, change the

exact order of his discussion, and modify, add to, and simplify some details of his work. My hope is that this will prevent the richness and inventiveness of his essay from overshadowing what I take to be its most pertinent contribution to the debate on Taylor's argument. A secondary goal is to offer clarificatory and critical notes on some of the issues at stake.

The argument Wallace confronts in his essay was presented by Richard Taylor in his 1962 paper, "Fatalism."² Taylor's argument is commonly referred to as the *logical* argument for fatalism, or "logical fatalism."³ Taylor formulates this argument as an argument by example, based on six general presuppositions. The example goes back at least to Aristotle, and it concerns "me"—"a naval commander, about to issue my order of the day to the fleet" (Taylor 1962, 46). The objective situation is that the occurrence or nonoccurrence of a sea battle tomorrow depends entirely on my order. If I issue an order to go to battle, there will be a battle tomorrow; if I issue another order, there will be no sea battle.

Consider the following abbreviations:

O: I issue an order to go to battle,

O': I issue an order to do something other than go to battle,

B: A naval battle occurs tomorrow,

P: It is within my power to do O,

P': It is within my power to do O'.

Using these abbreviations, nonfatalism, or the free-choice position, is expressed by:

$P \ \& \ P'$;

fatalism is expressed by:

$\sim P \vee \sim P'$.

Taylor's argument for fatalism is:⁵

1. $B \supset \sim P'$
2. $\sim B \supset \sim P$
3. $B \vee \sim B$
4. $\sim P \vee \sim P'$

This argument is clearly logically valid.⁶ This means that to the extent that its premises are all true, its conclusion is guaranteed to be true as well. Taylor informally describes the rationale for his premises as follows:

Premise 1: "In case [B] is true, then there is, or will be, lacking a condition essential for my doing O', the condition, namely, of there being no naval battle tomorrow."

Premise 2: "similar reason" (46–47).⁷

Premise 3: Law of excluded middle.⁸

Taylor claims that these premises (together with their informal rationale) rest on six presuppositions which are held "almost universally in contemporary philosophy" (42) and that if one accepts these presuppositions then one is committed to the argument's conclusion, namely, fatalism. That is, Taylor's claim is that fatalism follows from six widely held and uncontroversial beliefs. These beliefs—his argument's alleged presuppositions—are:⁹

- P1. Law of excluded middle.
- P2. If S is nonlogically sufficient for S', then S' is necessary for S (S cannot occur without S' also occurring).¹⁰
- P3. If S is necessary for S' (S' cannot occur without S also occurring), then S' is sufficient for S.
- P4. S is sufficient for S' if S' is necessary for S.

- P5. If S is necessary for A and \sim S holds,¹¹ then no agent can perform A.
- P6. Time is not by itself “efficacious.”¹²

Taylor describes the gist of his fatalism argument (as based on the above presuppositions) as follows: “What sort of order I issue depends, among other things, on whether a naval battle takes place tomorrow—for in this situation a naval battle tomorrow is (by [P4]) a necessary condition of my doing O, whereas no naval battle tomorrow is equally essential for my doing O” (47). Assuming the law of excluded middle, he continues, the conclusion follows.

As noted above, Taylor’s argument is commonly considered a “logical” argument for fatalism. But is it a purely logical argument? It is clear that if the argument is based (in a nonempty way) on all of P1–P6, it is not purely logical. And in any case, it is clear that if the argument is sound—i.e., both valid and has only true premises (hence *establishes* the truth of its conclusion)—then it is not purely logical, since the truth of premises 1 and 2, assuming they are true, is not attributable to pure logic. Hence to call the position advanced by the argument “logical fatalism” is inaccurate. At the same time, Taylor does not regard the argument as a metaphysical argument either. For example, he insists that the argument does not rest on specific considerations of either time relations or causation (47–48). Wallace, therefore, rightly understands Taylor’s argument as (or as intended to be) a “semantic,” or a logico-semantic, argument rather than either a logical or a metaphysical argument.

Wallace’s most general claim is that a logico-semantic argument cannot establish a metaphysical thesis, in this specific case, fatalism. This claim is both the starting and the ending point of his critique of Taylor. He begins his discussion by saying: “Taylor’s

central claim . . . is that just a few basic logical and semantic pre-suppositions . . . lead directly to the *metaphysical* conclusion that human beings, agents, have no control over what is going to happen” (Wallace 1985, 144). This claim gives rise to “the Taylor problem” (144), the problem that “a semantic argument . . . appears to force upon us a strange and unhappy metaphysical doctrine that does violence to some of our most basic intuitions about human freedom” (146).

Critically, Wallace asks: “How licit is an argument from linguistic, semantic, and logical premises to a thoroughly metaphysical conclusion?” (150). It is “precisely this move from semantics to metaphysics” that Wallace sets out “to attack in this essay” (150). And having (purportedly) accomplished this task, he concludes his essay by saying: “If Taylor and the fatalists want to force upon us a metaphysical conclusion, they must do metaphysics, *not* semantics. And this seems entirely appropriate” (213).

Wallace’s general claim is, then, that a substantive metaphysical thesis like fatalism cannot be established by a logical or a (general) semantic argument; rather, a bona fide metaphysical argument is needed to establish such a thesis. Implicit in this claim is the still stronger and more general claim that metaphysical theses can never be established by purely logical or general semantic principles.

In my view this claim is strictly speaking incorrect, though there is a significant kernel of truth in it. The claim is strictly incorrect because it is always possible to refute a thesis belonging to any science by showing that it contains a logical or a semantic contradiction. Assuming the thesis is metaphysical,¹³ this establishes the truth of its negation. But the negation of a metaphysical thesis is itself a metaphysical thesis. Therefore it is in principle possible to establish a metaphysical thesis based on purely logical and/or general semantic principles. At

the same time it seems clear that logical and semantic considerations cannot take the place of properly metaphysical considerations in developing our metaphysical theories. After all, logic and general semantics are blind to most (if not all) aspects of reality that are relevant to metaphysics, and as such cannot enlighten us about these aspects.

This blindness to most facets of reality is both the source of logic's and semantics' considerable theoretical efficacy and the source of their theoretical limitations. In logic's case, this has to do with what I elsewhere call its especially strong "degree of invariance" (see, e.g., Sher 2013).¹⁴ The basic idea is this: Logical notions (terms, constants) distinguish only formal features of objects (properties, situations) in the world—features like complementation, intersection, identity, nonemptiness, etc.¹⁵ Since these features are pertinent to all fields of knowledge, logic is efficacious in all fields. In particular, the logical laws apply in all fields. But logic is blind to all nonformal features of the world, including, in our case, its (nonformal) metaphysical features; therefore it is incapable of accounting for these features, and the burden of accounting for these features largely falls on other disciplines. It follows that Wallace's observation that logic has a very limited role in establishing metaphysical theses is, for the most part, warranted. The same applies to general semantics.

Wallace's criticism of Taylor, however, is not limited to his general claim concerning the inability of logic and semantics to yield metaphysical results. He sets out to examine Taylor's argument in detail, and in order to decide how best to critique it he begins by reflecting on the appropriate methodology for accomplishing this task. Having gone over the early literature on this argument¹⁶ and having familiarized himself with a relatively broad range of background literature,¹⁷ he concludes that Taylor was right in claiming that one cannot undermine his argument simply by saying

that its conclusion appears absurd. A better methodology, Wallace points out, would be to assign a charitable interpretation to Taylor's argument and show that even under such an interpretation the argument's conclusion—fatalism—does not in fact follow from its premises (assuming they are true). Showing this would demonstrate that Taylor's logico-semantic argument does not establish fatalism or at least would shift the burden of justification to the argument's defenders. In Wallace's words:

Taylor's thesis is that a certain argument "forces" a fatalistic conclusion upon us. It's clear that I cannot simply reject the conclusion out of hand, but it's just as clear that neither need I accept it and then show somehow by, say, *reductio* that it is inconsistent in some way. To "refute" Taylor I think I need show only that his conclusion is not *forced* upon us by his argument—for this is his *central* claim. . . . I need to show only that the four-step argument out of Taylor's six presuppositions does not actually yield what Taylor thinks it yields, that his argument is *invalid*. If intuitive rejections of premises and conclusion can be replaced by charitable interpretation, at least semi-rigorous argument, and a demonstration that fatalism follows not even from the most generous way of understanding Taylor's reasoning, the Taylor problem can actually be "solved," or at the very least the burden of argument and proof can be shifted from the opponent of fatalism to its proponent.

(WALLACE 1985, 159)

These methodological considerations appear to me by and large sound. Nevertheless, one qualification is called for: There is no guarantee that a given charitable interpretation of an argument captures its creator's intentions or that it is the "best" interpretation of this argument. More specifically, there is no guarantee that there is no other compelling interpretation of this

argument that does render it sound, i.e., “compels its conclusion on us.” But while this qualification puts into question Wallace’s claim that he has actually refuted Taylor’s claim, it does not affect his claim that the burden of justification has shifted (at least for the time being) to those who wish to defend Taylor. If Wallace’s construal of Taylor’s argument is indeed reasonable and charitable; if Taylor’s argument, under this interpretation, does not establish fatalism; and if Wallace’s treatment of the issues arising from Taylor’s argument is thorough and compelling, then he can succeed in shifting the burden of justification from Taylor’s critics to his allies. Following this methodological strategy, Wallace reasons as follows: “If Taylor’s fatalistic argument uses apparently non-controversial premises and appears internally valid, yet results in an obviously defective conclusion, it seems reasonable to suspect that the fatalist engages in some equivocation of his premises, or else some equivocation in the move from what is posited to what is concluded” (159–160).

Naturally, Wallace looks for equivocations and ambiguities in those parts of Taylor’s argument/presuppositions that involve, either explicitly or implicitly, potentially problematic elements, like modal, temporal, and causal parameters. Such parameters implicitly appear in steps 1–2 and 4 of Taylor’s argument and in presuppositions P2–P5, as was noted by Taylor’s early commentators. To see this, consider Taylor’s second premise, his second presupposition, and his conclusion. This premise

$$\sim B \supset \sim P$$

says that if no naval battle occurs tomorrow ($\sim B$), then it is not within my power to issue an order to go to battle ($\sim P$).

Now, since its consequent ($\sim P$) says, in effect,

It is not within my power to do O,

it is quite clear that it involves a *modal* operator of some kind. So we may charitably restate premise 2, following Abelson (1963), as

$$\sim B \supset \sim \diamond O,$$

i.e., as

If no naval battle occurs tomorrow ($\sim B$), then it is impossible that I issue an order to go to battle ($\sim \diamond O$).

Furthermore, it is possible to interpret premise 2 charitably as containing *time* markers (B being essentially later than O), as it was by one of Taylor's major defenders, Steven Cahn (1964), whose proposed version of Taylor's argument was "approved" by Taylor. In Cahn's version, the approximate correlate of premise 2 is:

If it is false at T_2 that a naval battle occurs at T_2 , then a necessary condition is lacking for [my] having issued order O at T_1 [so that it is impossible that O occurs at T_1] (Cahn 1964, 103 [8]).

Moreover, Cahn presents his correlate of premise 2 as partly derived from an earlier premise,

[My] issuing order O at T_1 is a sufficient condition for a naval battle occurring at T_2 (103 [2]),

which not only involves time markers but also suggests that, contrary to Taylor's claim, *causal* considerations are also pertinent to the soundness of his argument. (The relation between O occurring at T_1 and B occurring at T_2 is clearly causal.)

Taylor's second presupposition says that

If S is nonlogically sufficient for S', then S' is necessary for S.

Clearly, there is a modal operator in this presupposition, and, furthermore, this modal operator is, as Taylor explicitly says, *nonlogical*. But if this modal operator is not logical, then it is not unreasonable to presume that it is physical. And indeed, most of the commentators (Aune 1962, Abelson 1963, Cahn 1964, Saunders 1965, Brown 1965) view Taylor's modalities as physical (empirical, causal) in nature.

Wallace goes a step further.¹⁸ He distinguishes between two types of physical modalities:

- (a) Modalities based on compatibility of a given situation with general physical laws (general laws of nature),
- (b) Modalities based on compatibility between/among particular situations (assuming both/all are compatible with the general laws of nature).¹⁹

Wallace (1985, 149) explains the difference between the two types of physical modality by the following examples:

- (a)-impossibility: "It is not possible [that I am] both a human being and a quartz crystal"; "it is not possible [that I] travel faster than the speed of light"
- (b)-impossibility: "It is not possible [that I], now in Champaign, Illinois, [will touch] a building in Massachusetts thirty seconds from now"

The impossibilities involved in Taylor's argument (having to do with giving an order one day and there being or not being a sea battle the next day), Wallace points out, do not seem to be (a)-impossibilities. They are more likely to be (b)-impossibilities and as such might in principle involve times and/or causal relations.

Turning to the conclusion of Taylor's argument,

$$\sim P \vee \sim P',$$

it is clear, given our discussion above, that it, too, involves modal operators and as such is naturally expressed by

$$\sim\Diamond O \vee \sim\Diamond O'$$

or, based on the observation that the modality in question is not logical, and using “ \Diamond ” to express the appropriate type of possibility,

$$\sim\Diamond O \vee \sim\Diamond O'.$$

Now, implicit nonlogical modalities, causal relations, and time indices—all these provide a fertile ground for ambiguities and equivocations, and this suggests that Wallace’s strategy of looking for these in Taylor’s argument is a reasonable strategy (if not one that is guaranteed to succeed).

But is it really a reasonable strategy? One might object that Taylor’s argument is *logically* valid, and logically valid arguments have the property of monotonicity, meaning that by adding information—including information on the modal, temporal, and causal parameters implicit in their premises and conclusions—one cannot undermine their validity. So Wallace cannot undermine Taylor’s argument by adding new modal, temporal, and/or causal information to its premises.

This objection, however, does not pose an insurmountable obstacle for Wallace. He may claim that while Taylor’s argument, as originally formulated, is logically valid, its conclusion, as originally formulated, is *not tantamount to fatalism*. Taylor’s original conclusion is ambiguous: depending how one construes its implicit modal and temporal operators, it is either a fatalistic conclusion or a nonfatalistic conclusion. So, one challenge open to Wallace is a challenge to Taylor’s claim that his argument establishes *fatalism*. And this, indeed, is what Wallace does.

What, then, are the two ways in which Wallace disambiguates Taylor's conclusion? Wallace distinguishes between a genuinely fatalist conclusion, Conclusion 1, and a nonfatalist conclusion, Conclusion 2, which are both compatible with Taylor's original conclusion:

$$\sim P \vee \sim P'$$

Using “ t_0 ” to indicate the present day before I issue my order, “ t_1 ” to indicate the present day when I issue my order, and “ t_2 ” to indicate the following day, tomorrow, the day in which the order I issue will either cause a sea battle to occur or result in no sea battle occurring (say, at the end of the day), Wallace formulates Conclusions 1 and 2 in a way that could be construed as follows:

Conclusion 1: $At-t_0: [\sim\Diamond(at-t_1:O) \vee \sim\Diamond(at-t_1:O')]$

Conclusion 2: $At-t_2: [\sim\Diamond(at-t_1:O) \vee \sim\Diamond(at-t_1:O')]$

The wide-scope occurrence of the time indices indicates what Wallace calls the “context of evaluation”, i.e., the context of evaluating the truth (correctness) of the ensuing statements, or the context of the “situations-at-times . . . bear[ing] on [the] modality [or modalities in its scope]” (189). The narrow-scope occurrences of the time indices indicate the “context of occurrence”—the time period in which the situation in the scope of the modal operators (or a situation not in the scope of any modal operator) is said to occur.

What is the difference between the two conclusions with respect to fatalism? Conclusion 1 says that today the future is not open for me: either I cannot issue order O or I cannot issue order O'. Conclusion 2 says that looking back tomorrow at what transpired today,

it will become clear that certain things could not have occurred today. Or: what transpires tomorrow rules out either the possibility that the day before I in fact issued an order to go to battle or the possibility that the day before I in fact issued a no-battle order. Now, Wallace observes, of the two, only Conclusion 1 correctly expresses the idea of fatalism. Fatalism says that today (at t_0) it is not open to me, for one reason or another, a reason situated in the past or present (at t_0 or earlier), rather than in the future (t_2), to choose what order to give and act on this choice. It does not say that what actually transpires tomorrow is incompatible with some situation having transpired today.

Wallace clarifies this point by a pair of examples (173), analogous to Conclusions 1 and 2:

Example 1 (analog of Conclusion 1): “It couldn’t rain last night; last night a high-pressure ridge was keeping all rain-clouds away.”

Example 2 (analog of Conclusion 2): “It can’t have rained last night; there are no puddles on the sidewalk this morning.”

And Wallace concludes: Conclusion 2, unlike Conclusion 1, does not express a fatalism thesis. “The absence of a battle [tomorrow has no bearing on my] freedom and power to give order O [today] if [I choose]” (175).

Now, this line of reasoning seems reasonable (if not indefeasible), and if it is, then Wallace’s next task is to show us that Taylor’s argument does not entail Conclusion 1.

Informally, we can describe the line of reasoning used by Wallace in performing this task as follows: Suppose Taylor’s sea-battle scenario does imply Conclusion 1. Then, the things that prevent me from issuing either order O or order O’ are either laws of nature or causal circumstances. Since no law of nature prevents me from

issuing either order, it is causal circumstances that would prevent me from doing so. But causality is unidirectional, proceeding from past to future and not from future to past (or, at least, that is what most philosophers believe, which is the crucial point for Taylor). Therefore it would be causal circumstances holding *prior* to my issuing my order that would prevent me from performing O/O' at t_1 . However, Taylor's sea-battle scenario does not involve any such circumstances. Therefore, Taylor's argument is compatible with the negation of Conclusion 1; i.e., his argument *does not entail* Conclusion 1.

In setting out to show this more rigorously, we note that as originally formulated, the premises of Taylor's argument do not imply either Conclusion 1 or Conclusion 2. This is because they are not formulated in the same language as those conclusions. To see whether Taylor's premises imply either conclusion, then, we need to rewrite them in the language of these conclusions. The resulting argument, with the two alternative consequences, would be something like:

- $$\begin{array}{l}
 1'. \text{ At-}t_2: [(at-t_2:B) \supset (\sim\Diamond (at-t_1:O'))] \\
 2'. \text{ At-}t_2: [(at-t_2:\sim B) \supset (\sim\Diamond (at-t_1:O))] \\
 3'. \text{ At-all-}t: [(at-t:B) \vee (at-t:\sim B)] \\
 \hline
 4'-1. \text{ At-}t_0: [\sim\Diamond (at-t_1:O) \vee \sim\Diamond (at-t_1:O')] \\
 4'-2. \text{ At-}t_2: [\sim\Diamond (at-t_1:O) \vee \sim\Diamond (at-t_1:O')],
 \end{array}$$

where "B" now abbreviates "A sea battle occurs."

Now, Wallace claims that the argument $\langle 1', 2', 3', 4'-1 \rangle$ is invalid, and to establish this claim he delineates a model, call it "M," in which premises 1', 2', and 3' are all true, and 4'-1 is false. Simplifying, we can construe his model as follows: There are two different worlds— W and W' , three time indices— t_0 , t_1 , and t_2 —and a binary relation of physical compatibility between

worlds-at-times (a special type of accessibility relation between worlds).

Time t_0

World W: No pertinent information. (This means: No causal obstacles to anything concerning O, O', and B at later times.)

World W': Same as W.

Time t_1

World W: O occurs.

World W': O' occurs.

Time t_2

World W: B occurs.

World W': \sim B occurs.

Compatibility Relations Between Worlds-at-Times:

- (i) W at- t_0 is compatible with W at- t_1 , W' at- t_1 , W at- t_2 , and W' at- t_2 .
- (ii) W' at- t_0 is compatible with W at- t_1 , W' at- t_1 , W at- t_2 , and W' at- t_2 .
- (iii) W at- t_2 is compatible with W at- t_1 and incompatible with W' at- t_1 .
- (iv) W' at- t_2 is compatible with W' at- t_1 and incompatible with W at- t_1 .

Now, assuming (as the majority of philosophers presumably do) that the law of excluded middle holds in all possible worlds at all times, it is clear that 1', 2', 3', and 4'-2 are all true in M, while 4'-1 is false. That is, when formulated as above, Taylor's premises do not force fatalism upon us.

What are we to make of this result? It seems to me that what Wallace has shown is sufficient to support at least part of his claim, namely, that on his charitable construal of Taylor's argument

(charitable in rendering its three premises true in an intuitively judicious way), this argument does not “force” fatalism upon us. Taylor’s argument might entail Conclusion 2, but Conclusion 2 is not tantamount to fatalism. The question whether Taylor’s “proof” of fatalism fails, period, depends on whether, on closer examination, Wallace’s construal of his argument is optimal, and this I leave as an open question. But given Wallace’s sensible challenge to Taylor, his countermodel, and his thought-out discussion of the issues involved, I think it is reasonable to conclude that Wallace succeeded in shifting the burden of justification to Taylor’s supporters. Taylor’s supporters have either to show that his argument’s original conclusion is, as it stands, a genuine fatalism conclusion or else to reconstruct his argument so it leads to a genuine fatalism conclusion. But neither is easy to do. For example, to defend Taylor’s claim under a reconstrual of his argument requires showing that either the argument has no countermodels or that its conclusion is derivable from its premises in a(n appropriate) system in which all the premises are true. And both are difficult to accomplish. Negative-existential claims are often notoriously difficult to establish, and the construction of a well-motivated proof system that would validate (a reconstructed version of) Taylor’s argument is not an easy task either.²⁰

Taylor might, however, raise several objections to Wallace’s criticism that we have not considered yet. One of these is an objection he did raise with respect to other critics, namely, that since essentially *the same* argument as his argument for fatalism about the *future* succeeds in entailing fatalism about the *past*, which is something the majority of philosophers accept, it is problematic to argue that the argument fails in the former case. In Taylor’s words:

We all are . . . fatalists with respect to the past. No one considers past events as being within his power to control.

(TAYLOR 1962, 45)

Not one of my critics has seen . . . that the very refutations they give of my fatalism about the future would work just as well to prove that we should not be fatalists about the past.

(TAYLOR 1963B, 87)

No one feels the slightest suspicion about the . . . argument [for fatalism about the past]. Indeed, the logic of it seems so obvious that one might well wonder what can be the point of spelling it all out so exactly. But that is because everyone is already a fatalist about the past—no one supposes it is up to him what has happened, or that past things are still within his power.

The thing to note, however, is that these two arguments are formally identical, except only for tenses.

(TAYLOR 1963A, 62)

The argument Taylor refers to is an argument he himself gave, an argument that, like his argument for fatalism about the future, relates to a specific scenario and, according to Taylor, is based on the same six presuppositions as the latter. Here the “actions” in question are (i) *S*—seeing a headline announcing a sea battle yesterday when I open my morning newspaper, and (ii) *S'*—seeing an incompatible headline when I open the paper this morning. It is assumed that the headline I see accurately describes what has transpired yesterday. Using the following abbreviations,

S: When I open the newspaper I see the headline announcing a sea battle yesterday,

S': When I open the newspaper I see the headline announcing something other than a sea battle yesterday,

B: A naval battle occurs yesterday,

P: It is in my power to do *S*,

P': It is in my power to do *S'*.

Taylor's argument for fatalism about the past is then exactly the same as his argument for fatalism about the future (though with a somewhat different symbolization key):

1. $B \supset \sim P'$
2. $\sim B \supset \sim P$
3. $B \vee \sim B$

4. $\sim P \vee \sim P'$.

(BASED ON TAYLOR 1962, 45)

But this is not sufficient to defend the soundness of Taylor's argument for fatalism about the *future*. First, acknowledging the truth of fatalism about the past does not mean accepting any argument whatsoever for such fatalism. It is in principle possible that fatalism about the past is justified but that Taylor's argument for it is not sound (i.e., it is either invalid or at least one of its premises is false). Second, it is in principle possible that the conclusion of Taylor's argument for "fatalism about the past" is not really tantamount to fatalism about the past or is ambiguous between fatalism about the past and another thesis. If this is the case, it is possible that his argument is a sound argument for the second thesis but not for fatalism about the past. Third, it is possible that in spite of the external similarity between Taylor's arguments for fatalism about the past and the future, there are significant differences between these two arguments (reflected in the difference between their symbolization keys and the situations the two arguments relate to). Taylor himself acknowledges a difference in tense, or time indices, between the two arguments. If Wallace and others are right, and causality plays a central (if implicit) role in Taylor's arguments, then given the unidirectionality of causation, differences in time indices might be significant. Fourth, it might be questioned whether the two actions in Taylor's scenario are of a kind that can be used to adjudicate questions of free will, whether seeing a particular headline when one opens the paper

can be considered a freely chosen action at all, either past looking or future looking (comparable to giving an order). Finally, it is possible that on Wallace's reconstruction of the two arguments, the argument for fatalism with respect to the past is sound while the argument for fatalism with respect to the future is not.

Wallace himself claims that the last possibility is the case; namely, Taylor's argument for past-fatalism, unlike his argument for future-fatalism, is valid and sound. But to evaluate his claim that Taylor's argument for past-fatalism is sound, it is not sufficient to construct a single model that agrees with it. To establish validity claims we have to show that the argument has no counter-models, and this requires constructing a general system in which all the relevant models are determined. Wallace does construct such a system, a system he calls "J," but attempting to evaluate this system (which, among other things, is only partially delineated) would lead us away from the issues we are focusing on in this paper.²¹ Regardless of Wallace's validity claim, however, it appears that defending Taylor's argument for future-fatalism based on its similarity to his argument for past-fatalism is potentially problematic on several counts.

Taylor might try to defend his claim on future-fatalism on different grounds. For example, he might criticize Wallace's critique on the ground that it is committed to viewing truth as *relative* while truth is in fact *absolute*. In particular, Taylor might argue, relativity to a *context of evaluation* makes no sense.

Today, however, there is an influential response to this objection, thanks to John MacFarlane (2003, 2005, 2011). MacFarlane is aware of the widespread antipathy to truth relativism among contemporary philosophers: "Analytic philosophers tend to regard relativism about truth as hopelessly confused, easily refuted, and even a sign of deficient intellectual character" (2005, 321). They have a "deeply entrenched theoretical commitment to the absoluteness of . . . truth" (2003, 327). MacFarlane rejects this

commitment both on factual and on conceptual grounds: Factually, “some of the things we say and think *are . . . sensitive [to context]*” (2011, 138, my italics); conceptually, “the possibility of . . . expressions [which are sensitive to context] is coherent and intelligible” (2011, 139). Indeed, MacFarlane points out: “No one would deny that the truth of sentences must be relativized to context [sometimes]: ‘I am cold’ has no absolute truth-value, but is true in relation to some contexts of utterance, false in relation to others” (2003, 322). And there are other widely accepted types of relativity: “Many relativizations of truth are entirely orthodox. In model theory we talk of sentences being true relative to a model and an assignment of values to the variables, and in formal semantics we talk of sentences being true relative to a speaker and time, or more generally (following Kaplan 1989) a context of use” (2005, 322).

MacFarlane’s own contribution is the introduction of a new type of relativity, which, he argues, is essential for accounting for the truth (falseness, indeterminacy) of certain sentences and utterances, for example, future contingents. The relativity required for understanding the truth conditions of sentences of this kind, he says, is relativity to “*contexts of assessment*” (2005, 321):

We must relativize the truth of utterances to a *context of assessment*, and we must relativize the truth of sentences to both a context of utterance and a context of assessment. This amounts to recognizing a new kind of linguistic context-sensitivity: sentence truth can vary not just with features of the context of utterance [and other familiar contexts] but with features of the context of assessment.

(2003, 322)

And he adds: “It is failure to make room for this kind of context sensitivity that has left us with the traditional menu of unsatisfactory solutions to [such problems as] the problem of future contingents”

(2003, 322). “In order to make good sense of future contingents, we must allow the truth of utterances to be relativized to the context from which they are being assessed” (2003, 328).

And what is truth relativity to context(s) of assessment? It is “truth at a *point of evaluation*. . . . Points of evaluation are sequences of parameters, for example, speaker, location of utterance, time and assignment” (2003, 329). Consider the following example:

“There will be a sea battle tomorrow,” says Themistocles, at a time when it is objectively indeterminate whether there will be a sea battle the next day. Is his assertion accurate or inaccurate? The question can only be answered, according to a relativist view, relative to a particular context of assessment. Themistocles’ assertion is inaccurate as assessed from the moment at which it is made (m_0), accurate as assessed from a moment one day later on a possible future history with a sea battle (m_1), and inaccurate as assessed from a moment one day later on a possible future history without a sea battle (m_2).

(2011, 133)

But this is quite similar to what Wallace said about statements concerning the possibility that we act in one way or another in the future. MacFarlane, thus, can be viewed as offering a vindication of Wallace’s claim that the truth of some statements requires relativity to multiple contexts, specifically, in the case of free will and fatalism, relativity to *time of occurrence* and to *time of evaluation*.

Bringing Wallace to the contemporary scene, we might say that, in a sense, his essay anticipated MacFarlane. Wallace’s “context of evaluation” is a forerunner of MacFarlane’s “context of assessment,” and Wallace’s “time of evaluation” is one of the possible parameters in MacFarlane’s context of assessment. In this sense, then, Wallace was ahead of his time. This is a good note on which to end our assessment of his honors thesis’s contribution to philosophy.²²

NOTES

1. A more recent characterization of fatalism in the same spirit is: “FATALISM is the thesis that whatever happens must happen; every event or state of affairs that occurs, must occur, while the nonoccurrence of every event and state of affairs is likewise necessitated. With respect to human affairs, fatalism claims that we lack the power (capability, ability) to perform any actions other than the ones that we do, in fact, perform. Our belief that there are alternative courses of action available to our decisions and choices is mistaken. As a result, there is no such thing as (libertarian) free will” (Bernstein 2005, 65).
2. See also Taylor (1963a), chap. 5.
3. See, e.g., Rice (2010).
4. O, O', and B are based, almost verbatim, on Taylor (1962, 46). P and P' are the two conjuncts in Taylor's conclusion. I have changed some of the letters in Taylor's abbreviation key to make their association with the sentences they abbreviate more immediate and have added some abbreviations to make the logic of the argument clearer.
5. This is a somewhat simplified version of Taylor's argument (Taylor 1962, 46-47). A formulation that is more similar to the original would be:

1. $T(B) \supset \sim P'$
2. $T(\sim B) \supset \sim P$
3. $\underline{T(B) \vee T(\sim B)}$
4. $\sim P \vee \sim P'$,

where “T” abbreviates “It is true that.” But the simpler formulation is sufficient for our purpose.

6. Assuming classical logic, which is—significantly for Taylor's claim (see below)—the prevalent logic today.
7. These justifications of premises 1 and 2 are potentially open to criticisms, but since this is not essential for understanding Wallace's critique, I will not discuss it further here.
8. Or, for the alternative formulation of the argument, the principle of bivalence. (In the original Taylor text, however, only the law of excluded middle is mentioned.)
9. Based on Taylor (1962, 43-44).
10. S and S' are arbitrary states of affairs or conditions. P2-P5 are construed as universal (i.e., they hold for any S, S', and A [A is an arbitrary act]).

Informally, S is *nonlogically sufficient* for S' iff (if and only if) S ensures S' but does not logically entail S'. My formulations of P2 and P3 are affected by Taylor's claim that P4 *follows logically* from P2 and P3.

11. I.e., S does not occur "at the same or any other time." (Taylor 1962, 43).
12. Taylor explains: "the mere passage of time does not augment or diminish the capacities of anything and, in particular, . . . it does not enhance or decrease an agent's powers or abilities." (1962, 44).
13. Something that might be reflected in the thesis having nonlogical vocabulary in addition to logical vocabulary, it being task of metaphysics to restore consistency to its theories in light of the discovery of a contradiction, etc.
14. Intuitively, the relation between invariance and blindness is that a notion is invariant under all (actual and potential) variations or changes in the world that it is blind to.
15. Which are the objectual correlates of the logical constants.
16. Aune (1962), Abelson (1963), Taylor (1963a, 1964), Cahn (1964), Saunders (1965), Brown (1965), and possibly others.
17. Which includes Ayer (1963), Kripke (1963), Lehrer and Taylor (1964), Lewis (1973), von Wright (1974), Haack (1974), MacArthur (1976), White (1977, 1979), Loux (1979), Dowty, Wall, and Peters (1981), Landman (1984), and possibly others.
18. The following is based on Wallace (1985, 149, 165).
19. He calls these "situational" physical modalities, but we will not use this term here.
20. Whether Wallace's criticism applies to Cahn's reconstruction of Taylor's argument I will leave an open question.
21. For the same reason I have not examined Wallace's claim that Taylor's argument for future-fatalism establishes Conclusion 2.
22. I would like to thank two anonymous referees for their comments.

REFERENCES

- Abelson, R. 1963. "Taylor's Fatal Fallacy." *Philosophical Review* 72, no. 1. Reprinted in Cahn and Eckert 2011, 79–83. Citations refer to the reprint.
- Aune, B. 1962. "Fatalism and Professor Taylor." *Philosophical Review* 71, no. 4. Reprinted in Cahn and Eckert 2011, 69–78. Citations refer to the reprint.
- Ayer, A. J. 1936. *The Concept of a Person and Other Essays*. London: Macmillan.

- Bernstein, M. 2005. "Fatalism." In *The Oxford Handbook of Free Will*, ed. R. Kane. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Brown, C. D. 1965. "Fallacies in Taylor's 'Fatalism.'" *Journal of Philosophy* 62, no. 13. Reprinted in Cahn and Eckert 2011, 127–132. Citations refer to the reprint.
- Cahn, S. M. 1964. "Fatalistic Arguments." *Journal of Philosophy* 61, no. 10. Reprinted in Cahn and Eckert 2011: 93–106. Citations refer to the reprint.
- Cahn, S., and M. Eckert, eds. 2011. *Fate, Time, and Language: An Essay on Free Will*, by David Foster Wallace. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Dowty, D. R., R. E. Wall, and S. Peters. 1981. *Introduction to Montague Semantics*. Dordrecht: Kluwer.
- Haack, S. 1974. *Deviant Logic*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kaplan, D. 1989. "Demonstratives: An Essay on the Semantics, Logic, Metaphysics, and Epistemology of Demonstratives and Other Indexicals." In *Themes from Kaplan*, ed. J. Almog, J. Perry, and H. Wettstein. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kripke, S. 1963. "Semantical Considerations on Modal Logic." *Acta Philosophica Fennica* 16: 83–94.
- Landman, F. 1984. "Data Semantics for Attitude Reports." *Logique et Analyse* 106: 165–192.
- Lehrer, K., and R. Taylor. 1964. "Time, Truth and Modalities." *Mind* 74: 890–898.
- Lewis, D. 1973. "Causation." *Journal of Philosophy* 70: 556–567.
- Loux, R., ed. 1979. *The Possible and the Actual*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press.
- MacFarlane, J. 2003. "Future Contingents and Relative Truth." *Philosophical Quarterly* 53: 321–336.
- . 2005. "Making Sense of Relative Truth." *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 105: 321–339.
- . 2011. "Relativism." In *The Routledge Companion to the Philosophy of Language*, ed., D. Graff Fara and G. Russell. New York: Routledge.
- Prior, A. 1967. *Past, Present, and Future*. Oxford: Clarendon.
- Rice, H. 2010. "Fatalism." In *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. E. M. Zalta. <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/fatalism/>.
- Saunders, J. T. 1965. "Fatalism and Ordinary Language." *Journal of Philosophy* 62, no. 8. Reprinted in Cahn and Eckert 2011, 111–125. Citations refer to the reprint.

- Sher, G. 2013. "The Foundational Problem of Logic." *Bulletin of Symbolic Logic* 19: 145–198.
- Taylor, R. 1962. "Fatalism." *Philosophical Review* 71, no. 1. Reprinted in Cahn and Eckert 2011, 41–51. Citations refer to the reprint.
- . 1963a. *Metaphysics*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall.
- . 1963b. "A Note on Fatalism." *Philosophical Review* 72, no. 4. Reprinted in Cahn and Eckert 2011, 85–88. Citations refer to the reprint.
- . 1964. Comment. *Journal of Philosophy* 61, no. 10. Reprinted in Cahn and Eckert 2011, 107–110. Citations refer to the reprint.
- Von Wright, G. H. 1974. *Causality and Determinism*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Wallace, D. F. 1985. "Richard Taylor's 'Fatalism' and the Semantics of Physical Modality." Honors Thesis, Amherst College. In Cahn and Eckert 2011, 141–216.
- . 2005. "Kenyon College Commencement Address." <http://moreintelligentlife.com/story/david-foster-wallace-in-his-own-words>.
- White, A. R. 1977. *Modal Thinking*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press.