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FATALISM

A FATALIST—if there is any such—thinks he cannot do anything about the future. He thinks it is not up to him what is going to happen next year, tomorrow, or the very next moment. He thinks that even his own behavior is not in the least within his power, any more than the motions of the heavenly bodies, the events of remote history, or the political developments in China. It would, accordingly, be pointless for him to deliberate about what he is going to do, for a man deliberates only about such things as he believes are within his power to do and to forego, or to affect by his doings and foregoings.

A fatalist, in short, thinks of the future in the manner in which we all think of the past. For we do all believe that it is not up to us what happened last year, yesterday, or even a moment ago, that these things are not within our power, any more than are the motions of the heavens, the events of remote history or of China. And we are not, in fact, ever tempted to deliberate about what we have done and left undone. At best we can speculate about these things, rejoice over them or repent, draw conclusions from such evidence as we have, or perhaps—if we are not fatalists about the future—extract lessons and precepts to apply henceforth. As for what has in fact happened, we must simply take it as given; the possibilities for action, if there are any, do not lie there. We may, indeed, say that some of those past things *were* once within our power, while they were still future—but this expresses our attitude toward the future, not the past.

There are various ways in which a man might get to thinking in this fatalistic way about the future, but they would be most likely to result from ideas derived from theology or physics. Thus, if God is really all-knowing and all-powerful, then, one might suppose, perhaps he has already arranged for everything to happen just as it is going to happen, and there is nothing left for you or me to do about it. Or, without bringing God into the picture, one might suppose that everything happens in accordance with invariable laws, that whatever happens in the world at any

future time is the only thing that can then happen, given that certain other things were happening just before, and that these, in turn, are the only things that can happen at that time, given the total state of the world just before then, and so on, so that again, there is nothing left for us to do about it. True, what we do in the meantime will be a factor in determining how some things finally turn out—but these things that we are *going* to do will perhaps be only the causal consequences of what will be going on just before we do them, and so on back to a not distant point at which it seems obvious that we have nothing to do with what happens then. Many philosophers, particularly in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, have found this line of thought quite compelling.

I want to show that certain presuppositions made almost universally in contemporary philosophy yield a proof that fatalism is true, without any recourse to theology or physics. If, to be sure, it is assumed that there is an omniscient god, then that assumption can be worked into the argument so as to convey the reasoning more easily to the unphilosophical imagination, but this assumption would add nothing to the force of the argument, and will therefore be omitted here. And similarly, certain views about natural laws could be appended to the argument, perhaps for similar purposes, but they, too, would add nothing to its validity, and will therefore be ignored.

Presuppositions. The only presuppositions we shall need are the six following.

First, we presuppose that any proposition whatever is either true or, if not true, then false. This is simply the standard interpretation, *tertium non datur*, of the law of excluded middle, usually symbolized ($p \vee \neg p$), which is generally admitted to be a necessary truth.

Second, we presuppose that, if any state of affairs is sufficient for, though logically unrelated to, the occurrence of some further condition at the same or any other time, then the former cannot occur without the latter occurring also. This is simply the standard manner in which the concept of *sufficiency* is explicated. Another and perhaps better way of saying the same thing is that, if one state of affairs *ensures* without logically entailing the occurrence

of another, then the former cannot occur without the latter occurring. Ingestion of cyanide, for instance, *ensures* death under certain familiar circumstances, though the two states of affairs are not logically related.

Third, we presuppose that, if the occurrence of any condition is necessary for, but logically unrelated to, the occurrence of some other condition at the same or any other time, then the latter cannot occur without the former occurring also. This is simply the standard manner in which the concept of a *necessary condition* is explicated. Another and perhaps better way of saying the same thing is that, if one state of affairs is *essential* for another, then the latter cannot occur without it. Oxygen, for instance, is *essential* to (though it does not by itself ensure) the maintenance of human life—though it is not logically impossible that we should live without it.

Fourth, we presuppose that, if one condition or set of conditions is sufficient for (ensures) another, then that other is necessary (essential) for it, and conversely, if one condition or set of conditions is necessary (essential) for another, then that other is sufficient for (ensures) it. This is but a logical consequence of the second and third presuppositions.

Fifth, we presuppose that no agent can perform any given act if there is lacking, at the same or any other time, some condition necessary for the occurrence of that act. This follows, simply from the idea of anything being essential for the accomplishment of something else. I cannot, for example, live without oxygen, or swim five miles without ever having been in water, or read a given page of print without having learned Russian, or win a certain election without having been nominated, and so on.

And *sixth*, we presuppose that time is not by itself “efficacious”; that is, that the mere passage of time does not augment or diminish the capacities of anything and, in particular, that it does not enhance or decrease an agent’s powers or abilities. This means that if any substance or agent gains or loses powers or abilities over the course of time—such as, for instance, the power of a substance to corrode, or a man to do thirty push-ups, and so on—then such gain or loss is always the result of something other than the mere passage of time.

With these presuppositions before us, we now consider two situations in turn, the relations involved in each of them being identical except for certain temporal ones.

The first situation. We imagine that I am about to open my morning newspaper to glance over the headlines. We assume, further, that conditions are such that only if there was a naval battle yesterday does the newspaper carry a certain kind (shape) of headline—i.e., that such a battle is essential for this kind of headline—whereas if it carries a certain different sort (shape) of headline, this will ensure that there was no such battle. Now, then, I am about to perform one or the other of two acts, namely, one of seeing a headline of the first kind, or one of seeing a headline of the second kind. Call these alternative acts S and S' respectively. And call the propositions, “A naval battle occurred yesterday” and “No naval battle occurred yesterday”, P and P' respectively. We can assert, then, that if I perform act S , then my doing such will ensure that there was a naval battle yesterday (i.e., that P is true), whereas if I perform S' , then my doing that will ensure that no such battle occurred (or, that P' is true).

With reference to this situation, then, let us now ask whether it is up to me which sort of headline I shall read as I open the newspaper; that is, let us see whether the following proposition is true:

(A) It is within my power to do S , and it is also within my power to do S' .

It seems quite obvious that this is not true. For if both these acts were equally within my power, that is, if it were up to me which one to do, then it would also be up to me whether or not a naval battle has taken place, giving me a power over the past which I plainly do not possess. It will be well, however, to express this point in the form of a proof, as follows:

1. If P is true, then it is not within my power to do S' (for in case P is true, then there is, or was, lacking a condition essential for my doing S' , the condition, namely, of there being no naval battle yesterday).
2. But if P' is true, then it is not within my power to do S (for a similar reason).
3. But either P is true, or P' is true.

∴ 4. Either it is not within my power to do S , or it is not within my power to do S' ;

and (A) is accordingly false. A common-sense way of expressing this is to say that what sort of headline I see depends, among other things, on whether a naval battle took place yesterday, and that, in turn, is not up to me.

Now this conclusion is perfectly in accordance with common sense, for we all are, as noted, fatalists with respect to the past. No one considers past events as being within his power to control; we simply have to take them as they have happened and make the best of them. It is significant to note, however, that, in the hypothetical sense in which statements of human power or ability are usually formulated, one *does* have power over the past. For we can surely assert that, *if* I do S , this will ensure that a naval battle occurred yesterday, whereas *if*, alternatively, I do S' , this will equally ensure the nonoccurrence of such a battle, since these acts are, in terms of our example, quite sufficient for the truth of P and P' respectively. Or we can equally say that I can ensure the occurrence of such a battle yesterday simply by doing S and that I can ensure its nonoccurrence simply by doing S' . Indeed, if I should ask *how* I can go about ensuring that no naval battle occurred yesterday, perfectly straightforward instructions can be given, namely, the instruction to do S' and by all means to avoid doing S . But of course the hitch is that I cannot do S' *unless* P' is true, the occurrence of the battle in question rendering me quite powerless to do it.

The second situation. Let us now imagine that I am a naval commander, about to issue my order of the day to the fleet. We assume, further, that, within the totality of other conditions prevailing, my issuing of a certain kind of order will ensure that a naval battle will occur tomorrow, whereas if I issue another kind of order, this will ensure that no naval battle occurs. Now, then, I am about to perform one or the other of these two acts, namely, one of issuing an order of the first sort or one of the second sort. Call these alternative acts O and O' respectively. And call the two propositions, "A naval battle will occur tomorrow" and "No naval battle will occur tomorrow," Q and Q' respectively. We can assert, then, that, if I do act O , then my

doing such will ensure that there will be a naval battle, whereas if I do O' , my doing that will ensure that no naval battle will occur.

With reference to this situation, then, let us now ask whether it is up to me which sort of order I issue; that is, let us see whether the following proposition is true:

(B) It is within my power to do O , and it is also within my power to do O' .

Anyone, except a fatalist, would be inclined to say that, in the situation we have envisaged, this proposition might well be true, that is, that both acts are quite within my power (granting that I cannot do both at once). For in the circumstances we assume to prevail, it is, one would think, up to me as the commander whether the naval battle occurs or not; it depends only on what kind of order I issue, given all the other conditions as they are, and what kind of order is issued is something quite within my power. It is precisely the denial that such propositions are ever true that would render one a fatalist.

But we have, unfortunately, the same formal argument to show that (B) is false that we had for proving the falsity of (A), namely:

- 1'. If Q is true, then it is not within my power to do O' (for in case Q 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).
- 2'. But if Q' is true, then it is not within my power to do O (for a similar reason).
- 3'. But either Q is true, or Q' is true.
- ∴ 4'. Either it is not within my power to do O , or it is not within my power to do O' ;

and (B) is accordingly false. Another way of expressing this is to say that 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 our fourth presupposition) a necessary condition of my doing O , whereas no naval battle tomorrow is equally essential for my doing O' .

Considerations of time. Here it might be tempting, at first, to say that *time* makes a difference, and that no condition can be neces-

sary for any other *before* that condition exists. But this escape is closed by both our fifth and sixth presuppositions. Surely if some condition, at *any* given time, whether past, present, or future, is necessary for the occurrence of something else, and that condition does not in fact exist *at the time it is needed*, then nothing we do can be of any avail in bringing about that occurrence for which it is necessary. To deny this would be equivalent to saying that I can do something now which is, together with other conditions prevailing, sufficient for, or which ensures, the occurrence of something else in the future, *without* getting that future occurrence as a result. This is absurd in itself and contrary to our second presupposition. And if one should suggest, in spite of all this, that a state of affairs that exists *not yet* cannot, just because of this temporal removal, be a necessary condition of *anything* existing prior to it, this would be logically equivalent to saying that no present state of affairs can ensure another subsequent to it. We could with equal justice say that a state of affairs, such as yesterday's naval battle, which exists *no longer*, cannot be a necessary condition of anything existing subsequently, there being the same temporal interval here; and this would be arbitrary and false. All that is needed, to restrict the powers that I imagine myself to have to do this or that, is that some condition essential to my doing it *does* not, *did* not, or *will* not occur.

Nor can we wriggle out of fatalism by representing this sort of situation as one in which there is a simple loss of ability or power resulting from the passage of time. For according to our sixth presupposition, the mere passage of time does not enhance or diminish the powers or abilities of anything. We cannot, therefore, say that I have the power to do *O'* until, say, tomorrow's naval battle occurs, or the power to do *O* until tomorrow arrives and we find no naval battle occurring, and so on. What restricts the range of my power to do this thing or that is not the mere *temporal* relations between my acts and certain other states of affairs, but the very existence of those states of affairs themselves; and according to our first presupposition, the fact of tomorrow's containing, or lacking, a naval battle, as the case may be, is no less a fact than yesterday's containing or lacking

one. If, at any time, I lack the power to perform a certain act, then it can only be the result of something, other than the passage of time, that has happened, is happening, or will happen. The fact that there *is going* to be a naval battle tomorrow is quite enough to render me unable to do O' , just as the fact that there *has been* a naval battle yesterday renders me unable to do S' , the nonoccurrence of those conditions being essential, respectively, for my doing those things.

Causation. Again, it does no good here to appeal to any particular analyses of causation, or to the fact, if it is one, that causes only "work" forwards and not backwards, for our problem has been formulated without any reference to causation. It may be, for all we know, that causal relations have an unalterable direction (which is an unclear claim in itself), but it is very certain that the relations of necessity and sufficiency between events or states of affairs have not, and it is in terms of these that our data have been described.

The law of excluded middle. There is, of course, one other way to avoid fatalism, and that is to deny one of the premises used to refute (B). The first two, hypothetical, premises cannot be denied, however, without our having to reject all but the first, and perhaps the last, of our original six presuppositions, and none of these seems the least doubtful. And the third premise—that either Q is true, or Q' is true—can be denied only by rejecting the first of our six presuppositions, that is, by rejecting the standard interpretation, *tertium non datur*, of what is called the law of excluded middle.

This last escape has, however, been attempted, and it apparently involves no absurdity. Aristotle, according to an interpretation that is sometimes rendered of his *De Interpretatione*, rejected it. According to this view, the disjunction ($Q \vee Q'$) or, equivalently, ($Q \vee \neg Q$), which is an instance of the law in question, is a necessary truth. Neither of its disjuncts, however—i.e., neither Q , nor Q' —is a necessary truth nor, indeed, even a truth, but is instead a mere "possibility," or "contingency" (whatever that may mean). And there is, it would seem, no obvious absurdity in supposing that two propositions, neither of them true and neither of them false, but each "possible,"

might nevertheless combine into a disjunction which is a necessary truth—for that disjunction might, as this one plainly does, exhaust the possibilities.

Indeed, by assuming the truth of (*B*)—i.e., the statement that it is within my power to do *O* and it is also within my power to do *O'*—and substituting this as our third premise, a formal argument can be rendered to prove that a disjunction of contradictories might disjoin propositions which are neither true nor false. Thus:

1''. If *Q* is true, then it is not within my power to do *O'*.

2''. But if *Q'* is true, then it is not within my power to do *O*.

3''. But it is within my power to do *O*, and it is also within my power to do *O'*.

∴ 4''. *Q'* is not true, and *Q* is not true;

and to this we can add that, since *Q* and *Q'* are logical contradictories, such that if either is false then the other is true, then *Q* is not false, and *Q'* is not false—i.e., that neither of them is true and neither of them false.

There seems to be no good argument against this line of thought which does not presuppose the very thing at issue, that is, which does not presuppose, not just the truth of a disjunction of contradictories, which is here preserved, but one special interpretation of the law thus expressed, namely, that no third value, like “possible,” can ever be assigned to any proposition. And that particular interpretation can, perhaps, be regarded as a more or less arbitrary restriction.

We would not, furthermore, be obliged by this line of thought to reject the traditional interpretation of the so-called law of contradiction, which can be expressed by saying that, concerning any proposition, not both it and its contradictory can be true—which is clearly consistent with what is here suggested.

Nor need we suppose that, from a sense of neatness and consistency, we ought to apply the same considerations to our first situation and to proposition (*A*)—that, if we so interpret the law in question as to avoid fatalism with respect to the future, then we ought to retain the same interpretation as it applies to things past. The difference here is that we have not the slightest inclination to suppose that it is at all within our power what

happened in the past, or that propositions like (*A*) in situations such as we have described are ever true, whereas we do, if we are not fatalists, believe that it is sometimes within our power what happens in the future, that is, that propositions like (*B*) are sometimes true. And it was only from the desire to preserve the truth of (*B*), but not (*A*), and thus avoid fatalism, that the *tertium non datur* was doubted, using (*B*) as a premise.

Temporal efficacy. It now becomes apparent, however, that if we seek to avoid fatalism by this device, then we shall have to reject not only our first but also our sixth presupposition; for on this view time will by itself have the power to render true or false certain propositions which were hitherto neither, and this is an "efficacy" of sorts. In fact, it is doubtful whether one can in any way avoid fatalism with respect to the future while conceding that things past are, by virtue of their pastness alone, no longer within our power without also conceding an efficacy to time; for *any* such view will entail that future possibilities, at one time within our power to realize or not, cease to be such *merely* as a result of the passage of time—which is precisely what our sixth presupposition denies. Indeed, this is probably the whole point in casting doubt upon the law of excluded middle in the first place, namely, to call attention to the status of some future things as mere possibilities, thus denying both their complete factuality and their complete lack of it. If so, then our first and sixth presuppositions are inseparably linked, standing or falling together.

The assertion of fatalism. Of course one other possibility remains, and that is to assert, out of a respect for the law of excluded middle and a preference for viewing things under the aspect of eternity, that fatalism is indeed a true doctrine, that propositions such as (*B*) are, like (*A*), never true in such situations as we have described, and that the difference in our *attitudes* toward things future and past, which leads us to call some of the former but none of the latter "possibilities," results entirely from epistemological and psychological considerations—such as, that we happen to *know* more about what the past contains than about what is contained in the future, that our memory extends to past experiences rather than future ones, and so on. Apart from

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subjective feelings of our power to control things, there seem to be no good philosophical reasons against this opinion, and very strong ones in its favor.

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