

Basic argument for fatalism



**ASSIGN
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Metaphysics The “ Basic” Argument for Theological Fatalism Fatalism

Fatalism is the view that everything that happens is entirely unavoidable.

Since everything that happens is unavoidable, none of our actions are genuinely up to us and we are powerless to do anything other than what we actually do. Here is Richard Taylor on what the fatalist believes [“ Fate” from *Metaphysics*, 4th Ed (Pearson, 1991)]: “ A fatalist is someone who believes that whatever happens is and always was unavoidable.

He thinks it is not up to him what will happen a thousand years hence, next year, tomorrow, or the very next moment. ” (52) “ A fatalist thinks of the future in the way we all think of the past, for everyone is a fatalist as he looks back on things. ” (52) We all think of the past “ as something settled and fixed, to be taken for what it is. We are never in the least tempted to try to modify it. It is not in the least up to us what happened last year, yesterday, or even a moment ago, any more than are the motions of the heavens or the political developments in Tibet. We say of past things that they are no longer within our power. The fatalist says they never were. ” (52-53) Theological Fatalism According to the main versions of Western Monotheism (e. g. traditional Christianity), God is omniscient. To be omniscient is to have (in some important sense) unlimited knowledge. It’s hard to say what this amounts to, but let’s use the following definition (since it’s common) x is omniscient = for x knows every true proposition and x does not believe any false propositions.

Many people think that omniscience is incompatible with human freedom, because it implies the doctrine of theological fatalism. Theological fatalism is the view that all human actions are unavoidable (and we are powerless to do

anything other than what we actually do) because God has exhaustive foreknowledge of all future human actions. Here is an important statement of the argument for theological fatalism from Augustine (On Free Choice of the Will, Book III) I very much wonder how God can have foreknowledge of everything in the future, and yet we do not sin by necessity.

It would be an irreligious and completely insane attack on God's foreknowledge to say that something could happen otherwise than as God foreknew ... Since God foreknew that [Adam] was going to sin, his sin necessarily had to happen. How, then, is the will free when such inescapable necessity is found in it? Surely this is the problem ... How is it that these two propositions are not contradictory and inconsistent: (1) God has foreknowledge of everything in the future; and (2) We sin by the will, not by necessity? For, you say, if God foreknows that someone is going to sin, then it is necessary that he sin.

But if it is necessary, the will has no choice about whether to sin; there is an inescapable and fixed necessity. And so you fear that this argument forces us into one of two positions: either we draw the heretical conclusion that God does not foreknow everything in the future; or, if we cannot accept this conclusion, we must admit that sin happens by necessity and not by will. The Basic Argument for Theological Fatalism Where S stands for any person whatsoever and A stands for any action, Augustine's argument can be stated as: 1. For any person, S, and an action, A, that S performs, God knew in advance that S will do A. 2.

If God knows in advance that S will do A, then it necessary that S will do A. 3. Therefore, it is necessary that S will do A. 4. If it is necessary that S will do A,

then S is not free to refrain from performing A. 5. If S is not free to refrain from performing A, then S does not freely perform A. 6. Therefore, no person ever acts freely. Evaluating the argument Premise 2 is ambiguous •P2a: Necessarily, If God knows in advance that S will perform A, then S will perform A (De Dicto) •P2b: If God knows in advance that S will perform A, then necessarily S will perform A (De Re) P2a is true but the resulting argument is invalid

P2a is true. It says that the proposition “ if God knows in advance that S will perform A, then S will perform A” is necessarily true and this just means that it is impossible for God to know in advance that, for example, I will raise my arm at some time and I fail to raise my arm at that time. We can put this by saying that God’s knowing in advance that I will raise my arm at some time logically entails that I will raise my arm at that time. P2a is a way of expressing this truth. The resulting argument is invalid. Using P2a as the key premise, the argument is: 1.

Necessarily, if God knows in advance that S will perform A, then S will perform A. 2. God knows in advance that S will perform A. 3. Therefore, necessarily, S will perform A. But this argument is invalid (the conclusion doesn’t follow from the premises). We can show this by means of a counterexample (an argument of the same form with true premises and a false conclusion). The form of this argument is: 1. Necessarily, If p, then p. 2. P 3. Therefore, necessarily q. To see that the argument is invalid, use the following substitutions: p = K. Sharpe weighs over 200lbs, q = K. Sharpe weighs over 199lbs. . Necessarily, If K. Sharpe weighs over 200lbs, then K. Sharpe weighs over 199lbs. 2. K. Sharpe weighs over 200lbs 3. Therefore,

necessarily K. Sharpe weighs over 199lbs. The premises of this argument are true but the conclusion is obviously false (I could go on a diet and successfully lose some weight). I weigh over 199lbs but not essentially. I could weigh less than 199lbs and, in fact, I did weigh less than 199lbs at one point. All that follows from the first two premises is that, in fact, I in fact weigh more than 199lbs. It doesn't follow that it is impossible for me to weigh less than 199lbs.

Just in case you are not convinced, here is a second counterexample (Plantinga's) 1. Necessarily, if I know that George Clooney is a bachelor, then George Clooney is a bachelor. 2. I know that George Clooney is a bachelor. 3. Therefore, it is necessarily true that George Clooney is a bachelor Again, the premises are true but the conclusion is false. George Clooney is a bachelor but he is not essentially a bachelor. He could get married, he just chooses not to. All that follows from the first two premises is that George Clooney is in fact a bachelor (not that he is essentially a bachelor).

P2b renders the argument valid but it is obviously false 1. If God knows in advance that S will perform A, then necessarily S will perform A. 2. God knows in advance that S will perform A. 3. Therefore, necessarily S will perform A. This argument is valid (it's just modus ponens) and so if the premises were true then conclusion would be true as well. But P2b is false. Given the de re reading of P2b, it says that whatever propositions God knows are necessarily true or, to put the point in terms of properties, if God knows that some object has a property then the object has that property essentially.

Taken in this way, P2b is obviously false (nor does it follow from omniscience). Since the basic argument has to rely on either P2a or P2b, the argument is either invalid or relies on a false premise. Either way it's unsound. Here is a way of thinking about this criticism of the argument. From the fact that God knows that Paul will mow his yard on July 7, 2015 it follows that, on July 7 2015, Paul mows his yard and that he does not refrain from mowing his yard on that day.

But, it does not follow that it is metaphysically impossible for Paul to refrain from mowing his yard that day (that Paul does not refrain from mowing and it is impossible that Paul refrain from mowing are two very different things). All that follows from the fact that God knows in advance that Paul will mow is that Paul will not exercise his power to refrain not that he lacks the power the power to refrain. The basic argument for theological fatalism needs the later inference, but that inference is not a good one. Thus, the basic argument fails.