Fatalism and Truth at a Time
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Abstract: In this paper, I will examine an argument for fatalism. I will offer a formalized version of the argument and analyze one of the argument's most controversial assumptions. Then, I will argue that one ought to reject the assumption that propositions *about* the future are true facts *of* the past, even if no one makes reference to such propositions.

Introduction

In this paper, I will present an argument for fatalism. I will argue that the success or failure of the argument is dependent upon the meaning of "true at T." After considering proposed explanations of "true at T" from Nelson Pike and Peter Van Inwagen, I will demonstrate some problems with each explanation and argue that the most plausible interpretation of "true at T" renders the fatalist argument invalid.[1]

The Fatalist Argument

In this argument, let 'E' denote some event:

1. Either E will take place tomorrow or E will not take place tomorrow.
(Assumption)

2. If a proposition about the past is true, then it is now necessary, i.e., inescapable or unpreventable.
(Assumption)

3. If E will take place tomorrow, then yesterday it was true that E will take place in two days.
(Assumption)

4. So, if E will take place tomorrow, then it is now necessary that yesterday it was true that E will take place in two days.
(From 2 and 3)

5. If it is now necessary that yesterday E will take place in two days, then it is now necessary that E will take place tomorrow.
(Assumption)

6. So, if E will take place tomorrow, then it is now necessary that E will take place tomorrow.
(From 4 and 5)

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[1] "Future Contingents," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosphy*, last modified June 9, 2001, http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/future-contingents (18 November 2012).

7. Likewise, if E will not take place tomorrow, then it is now necessary that E will not take place tomorrow.
(From 3-5, *mutatis mutandis*)

8. Either it is now necessary that E will take place tomorrow or it is now necessary that E will not take place tomorrow.
(From 1, 6, and 7)

9. Therefore, what will happen tomorrow will happen necessarily, i.e., inescapably, unavoidably.
(From 8)

The conclusion is that what is going to happen tomorrow will happen necessarily. This argument, if successful, demonstrates that every event in the future is fated to occur. Therefore, if anyone doubts the conclusion, then he or she must show which premise is false or which inference is invalid.

The Argument Analyzed

Although the argument seems very plausible, there is an implicit assumption in the argument that needs further examining. The assumption contained within premise 3 is that if a proposition is true, then it is true at all times. But what does it mean to say that a proposition is "true at all times?" Given the previous assumption, the fatalist must clarify what it means to say that a proposition about some time is not only true, but is true at a time that is previous to the time indicated in the given proposition. I will later argue that one ought to reject the assumption that propositions *about* the future are truths *of* the past, even if no one makes reference to such a proposition.

True at T

Although everyone knows what it means to say that a given proposition is true, it is quite different to say that a given proposition is true at some time. Since the fatalist argument requires that there are true propositions *about* the future that are true *in* the past, we need to determine exactly what this means. If the notion of a true proposition *in* the past either is meaningless or is properly understood not to entail that the proposition is a truth *of* the past, then the fatalist argument is unsuccessful. Phrases of the form "true at T" are quite bewildering to several philosophers. Nelson Pike writes, "I am inclined to think that the whole idea of dating the truth-value of a statement in which a date is already assigned to a given event or action, is obscuristic and strange."[2] Peter Van Inwagen states:

> Now I do not think that what we have been offered is a good explanation of the meaning of 'x is true at t' since I don't think this sentence means anything—just as I don't think 'The number twelve is even in Tibet'

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[2] Nelson Pike, *God and Timelessness* (New York: Schocken Books, 1970), 71.

> means anything—and thus I don't think anything is or
> could be an explanation, good or bad, of its meaning.[3]

It seems just as strange to talk about propositions being "true at T" as being "true at L" where "L" denotes some location in the world. What does it mean to say, for example, that 2+2 = 4 in America? Someone may respond, "But I do know what it means to say that 2+2 = 4 in America; it is true in America because it is true everywhere." The failure of this response is that it only pushes the problem back one more level. We can see what it is for a proposition to be true, but what does it mean to say that the proposition is true everywhere? There seems to be a *prima facie* case against the intelligibility of qualifying truth statements either temporally or spatially.

A possible objection, discussed by Peter Van Inwagen, is that temporal qualification of truth statements is intelligible insofar as there are instances of it in regular speech, such that we can in fact make sense of something's being "true at T."[4] At first, the objection seems plausible enough. Suppose I say, "It's raining," and you reply, "That used to be true, but it isn't true anymore." If p denotes "It's raining," then in this instance you can seem to mean "p is true at T_1" and "p is false at T_2." But in fact, what you really mean is that "p at T_1" is true while "p at T_2" is false. In this case, it seems that the previous sentences about raining are denoting different propositions and that this is what happens in ordinary language. When we say things that seem to indicate that a given proposition used to be true but then became false, what we are really saying is that if one asserts the given sentence at T_1, then the corresponding proposition will be true, while if someone asserts the same sentence at T_2, the corresponding proposition would be false. The confusion is a result of the fact that, for the sake of convenience, ordinary language users do not always differentiate between the different propositions expressed by the same statement uttered at different times.

But what if the given translation is implausible and therefore not faithful to what we actually mean when we say the given sentences? Here too, Van Inwagen has an argument to consider.[5] Suppose someone utters the sentence, "The number of players on the basketball team is odd," and someone replies, "It used to be odd, but it isn't anymore." Further, let us stipulate that the number of players on the team used to be 11. The person who replied could mean that the number 11 used to be odd, but that it is not anymore. The person could also mean that the expression "the number of players on the basketball team" used to denote 11, but "the number of players on the basketball team" no longer denotes 11. Since the first translation is absurd, it seems plausible that the second one is correct. If the second translation is correct, then Van Inwagen's translation schema is faithful to our intended meaning in the above sentences.

Although Van Inwagen denies that it makes sense to refer to temporal qualifications of propositions, there are certain sentences that seem to refer to

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[3] Peter Van Inwagen, *An Essay on Free Will* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), 38.
[4] Ibid.
[5] Ibid.

temporally qualified propositions. Consider the following sentence: "George W. Bush will be President of the United States." The sentence is a tough case only if one is an A-theorist concerning time. An A-theorist is one who believes that there exist "A-properties," such as being past, being present, and being future that are not reducible to relations such as later than or earlier than. An A-theorist further believes that there is an objective present that is constantly changing whereas one who is not an A-theorist does not believe that there is an objective present. If an A-theorist is correct concerning the previous claims, then sentences about the future such as "George W. Bush will be President of the U.S." refer to propositions that used to be true, but at the present point in time are false—in which case there are intelligible cases of temporally qualified statements. If the A-theory of time is true, it seems that the fatalist argument can succeed. The fatalist can say that there are truths *in* the past *about* the future that necessitate the actions in the future.

The objection from the A-theorist is formidable, but there seems to be an adequate response to it. In order for the fatalist argument to succeed, propositions *about* the future must be temporal. But since the propositions are without change logically prior to becoming false it seems that the propositions are atemporal logically prior to their losing the property of being true and gaining the property of being false. For this reason, it does not make sense to talk about the propositions at a given time in the past since the propositions are atemporal logically prior to becoming false. Therefore, the fatalist assumption that propositions *about* the future are *in* the past is false. If the truth values of propositions about the future change, then contrary to Van Inwagen, it seems to make sense to say that some propositions used to be true. In the following section of the paper, I will consider different accounts of what it might mean to say that a proposition used to be true. Before I do so, a few more comments regarding the objection from the A-theorist are pertinent.

If the previous reply is unsuccessful and propositions *about* the future are temporal, then what follows? It seems that the proposition, "George W. Bush will be President of the U.S." is fated to occur. But just because it is fated to occur, it does not follow that the event is fated to occur at any particular time. It may be the case that future events are fated to occur even though the exact ordering of the events is not fated. For example, one might be fated to marry a particular person, have a particular job, and live in a particular place although the ordering of these events remains in one's control. It is also important to recall that the previous objection presupposes an A-theory of time, so if that theory is false, then the given objection is unsuccessful. Additionally, since most A-theorists are presentists, they could become non-A-theorists in light of Joshua Rasmussen's recent argument that a presentist need not be an A-theorist.[6]

Since it is not at all clear what "true at T" means, one must consider some proposed definitions of the statement "true at T," where "T" is a time in the past. The first definition comes from Nelson Pike. He suggests that we

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[6] Joshua Rasmussen, "Presentists May Say Goodbye to A-properties," *Analysis* 72, no. 2 (2012), 270.

translate the sentence, "p is true at T_1" as "p at T_1" is true.[7] Let's consider an example. Suppose someone says, "'Jones runs', is true at T_2." We can translate that sentence as "'Jones runs at T_2' is true." Suppose someone replies, "The statement 'Jones runs at T_2 is true' is true at T_1." Now the sentence becomes "Jones runs at T_2 at T_1 is true." The problem here is that the original proposition "Jones runs" is indexed to a specific time, T_2, and the new proposition that "Jones runs at T_2 at T_1" is an indexed proposition of the *original* indexed proposition. If Pike's definition is correct, then the fatalist argument will be unsuccessful since we will not be able to index a proposition to a given time if the proposition is *already* indexed to a different time. If fatalists merely want to index propositions that are not already indexed to a given time, this will do them no good because the stated proposition will merely be *about* the future, but it will not be a fact *of* the past.

Van Inwagen has proposed an alternative to Pike's definition of "true at T." Van Inwagen states, "to make sense of this idea [viz., "true at T"], it would be sufficient to make sense of the open sentence: (The proposition) x is true at (the moment) t." Both he and Gilbert Ryle propose, "If someone were to assert x and nothing else at t, then what he asserted at t would be true."[8] There is a problem with the previous definition.[9] Consider a state of affairs in which no propositions have been asserted in 10,000,000 BC or earlier. If the notion of "true at T" makes sense, then if we let "p" denote the proposition that no propositions have been asserted in 10,000,000 BC or earlier, it would seem that p is true in 10,000,000 BC. But if someone asserted p in 10,000,000 BC, then p would turn out to be false by the very act of asserting it. Therefore, if p is true in 10,000,000 BC, then according to the definition, if someone asserted p in 10,000,000 BC, what he asserted would be true. However, if he asserted p, then what he asserted would be false. P would be false because a proposition would have been asserted in 10,000,000 BC or earlier. Therefore, according to the definition, what he asserted would be both true and false.

Although Van Inwagen's definition has a problem, it seems to be the most intuitive definition of what it means to say that something is "true at T". Although the definition produces a paradox, classic logic is similarly paradoxical, as illustrated by the liar paradox. In this paradox, consider the sentence, "this sentence is false." If it is true, then it is false, and if it is false, then it is true. Therefore, it may be unreasonable to disregard the fatalist definition because of the technical problems just as it would be unreasonable to dismiss classical logic because of the liar paradox. Additionally, since Van Inwagen's definition seems to be the most plausible definition of "true at T," it is not clear what else it could mean. Therefore, the previous definition seems to be the only definition that can give the fatalist argument a chance for success.

It is now appropriate to consider the second and third premises with the Van Inwagen and Ryle translation schema:

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[7] Pike, 68.
[8] Van Inwagen, 37.
[9] Ibid., 228-9.

2. If a proposition about the past is true, then it is now necessary, i.e., inescapable or unpreventable. (Assumption)

3. If E is going to take place tomorrow, then it is true that yesterday it was true that E would take place in two days. (Assumption)

Since we now have a definition for "true at T," let us look over premises 3 through 5 with the given translations.

3*. If E is going to take place tomorrow, then it is true that if someone had asserted yesterday that E would take place in two days and nothing else, then what he asserted would be true. (Assumption)

4*. If E is going to take place tomorrow, then it is now necessary that if someone had asserted yesterday that E would take place in two days and nothing else, then what he asserted would be true. (Follows from 2 and 3)

5*. If it is now necessary that if someone had asserted yesterday that E would take place in two days and nothing else, then what he asserted would be true; then it is now necessary that E is going to take place tomorrow. (Assumption)

It seems that the inference from 2 and 3* to 4* is invalid. While it is the case that the consequent of 3* is *about* the past in the sense that it is about what *could have* happened in the past (i.e., the past of a different possible world), it is not *about* the past in the sense that it is a fact *of* the past about *what actually* happened in the past. Since the consequent of 3* does not fall under the scope of premise 2, and because the scope of premise 2 only includes the actual past, the inference from 2 and 3* to 4* is now fallacious.

Additionally, even if one were to allow the previous inference, premise 5 becomes very implausible in light of the translation schema. The inference essentially says that if the consequent of the previous premise—which is a conditional—is necessarily true, then it is necessary that the future event will occur. But clearly the previous inference is problematic. The inference commits a modal fallacy by confusing the necessity of the *inference* with the necessity of the *consequent*. Since it would only be the case that the *inference itself* is necessary, unless the antecedent were *necessarily true*, it does not follow that the consequent is *necessarily true*. And if it does not follow that the consequent is necessarily true, then it does not follow that it is now necessary that E is going to take place tomorrow. Since the inference from 2 and 3* to 4* is fallacious, and 5* is false, the fatalist argument is unsuccessful.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that the fatalist argument hinges on the assumption that there are truths *about* the future that are facts *of* the past, even if no one makes reference to a proposition about the future. Since we have no reason to accept this assumption and have reasons to reject it, the fatalist argument is unsuccessful. I have not considered whether or not there are truths *about* the future that are facts *of* the past in virtue of a person referencing the future through asserting, uttering, or believing a proposition about the future; so it may be the case that the action of referencing a proposition *about* the future becomes a fact *of* the past and thereby *necessitates* the future event. Since dealing with this problem is not within the scope of my paper, I leave it to others to decide whether or not referencing the future makes any future event necessarily occur. ❖