

Fatalism and the open future

PHIL 1480 Metaphysics

Cian Dorr

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1. Fatalism

Necessarily, no-one can ever do anything other than what they in fact do.
Equivalently: For any P, necessarily, it is never up to anyone whether P.

2. A “fatalist” argument

- (1) I will brush my teeth today.
- (2) So it was the case yesterday that I would brush my teeth the following day (from 1)
- (3) It is not now, and never will be up to me whether it was the case yesterday that I would brush my teeth the following day.
- (4) So it is not now, and never will be up to me whether I will brush my teeth today.
(from 2 and 3)

Possible reactions: reject (1); reject the inference from (1) to (2); reject (3); reject the inference from (2) and (3) to (4); accept (4). Let’s talk about these, not in order.

3. Rejecting the inference from (2) and (3) to (4)

(1) is a logical consequence of (2). So the principle one needs to underwrite this inference is this: if Q is a logical consequence of P, then ‘it is not up to me whether Q’ is a logical consequence of P together with ‘it is not up to me whether P’.

This looks *awfully* plausible. If I can’t do anything about some fact, then I can’t do anything about its logical consequences.

4. Rejecting the inference from (1) to (2)

One might think that the truth of (2) would be inconsistent with the fact that it was (in some sense) an “open question”, yesterday, whether I would brush my teeth the following day. But this question is just as “open” now as it was yesterday; so if considerations of “openness” are relevant to the argument at all, it is because they block the truth of (1).

5. Accepting (4)

It is hard to think of a principled basis on which anyone could deny that it will ever be up to me whether I brush my teeth today without claiming that it is never up to anyone whether P, for any P—i.e. being a fatalist.

6. Rejecting (1).

The obvious problem with this strategy is that, if one doesn't resist the argument in some *other* way, one will be left with the following exactly analogous argument:

(1') I will not brush my teeth today.

(2') So it was the case yesterday that I would not brush my teeth the following day (from 1')

(3') It is not now, and never will be up to me whether it was the case yesterday that I would not brush my teeth the following day.

(4') So it is not now, and never will be up to me whether I do not brush my teeth today. (from 2' and 3')

Aristotle's solution (?): (1) is not true, but *it isn't false* either—and likewise for (1'). More generally: future tense sentences are neither true nor false, when they concern matters that are up to us.

An argument against this view

(5) Either I will brush my teeth today or I won't.

(6) If I will brush my teeth today, (1) is true.

(7) If I won't brush my teeth today, (1) is false.

(8) Therefore, either (1) is true or (1) is false (from (5), (6), (7)).

Strategies for dealing with this: reject the validity of the argument; reject (6) or (7); reject (5).

•N.B.: if one rejects 5, one shouldn't claim that (5) is *false*, or assert its *negation*!

9. Rejecting (3)

The intuition behind (3): how things were in the past isn't up to us now.

But someone could reject (3) while finding some truth in this intuition. One could distinguish between facts *intrinsically* about the past and facts extrinsically about the past. One could agree that the former facts are not up to us, while claiming that the fact that yesterday it was the case that I would brush my teeth the following day is only extrinsically about the past: it attributes to yesterday the relational property *being followed by a day on which I brush my teeth*.

A souped-up argument for (3): suppose that, as a matter of fact, yesterday John happened to utter the sentence 'CD will brush his teeth tomorrow' and no other sentences.

Then one could argue:

John said truly, yesterday, that I would brush my teeth the next day.

It is not now, and never will be up to me whether John said truly, yesterday, that I would brush my teeth the next day.

Therefore, it is not now, and never will be up to me whether it was the case yesterday that I would brush my teeth the next day.

10. The open future and the debate between A-theorists and B-theorists

It is clearly possible for an A-theorist to believe that future-tense claims are neither true nor false when they have to do with matters that are up to us. What's more surprising is that it is also possible for a B-theorist to believe this. Instead of the single manifold of spatiotemporally interrelated events, one must believe in a 'branching' manifold, with a tree-like structure. Future-tense claims are true only if they are true on all the branches.

- My colleague Nuel Belnap believes something like this.