

## **On Fatalism**

### Introduction

In Greek Mythology, the Goddess of Necessity, known as Themis, bore three daughters. Each of them possessed a name that many of us might not recognize. They were Klotho, Lakheis, and Atropos. However, we might know them better by their proper collective name: The Fates. Klotho weaved the thread of life, Lakheis measured the length of the thread, and Atropos, with her great shears, cut this thread. It is said that they laugh at the attempts of men to cheat them, for in the end, no matter what a man does, the fates will always prevail. <sup>1</sup>

This is the common image that many Greeks grew up knowing as fate. An inexorable unstoppable force that no man, hero, or god could dissuade. Long after Greek mythology disappears from our thoughts and the gods of old no longer hold sway over mankind, the Fates seem, for some, still a horrifying reality. Is this specter of inevitability something that we, as rational persons, should still be worried about or is it something that should be regarded a relic of past beliefs? It is on the necessity of Fate that I desire to speak about today.

### What is Fatalism?

In the illustration I just used gives you some idea of the emotional sentiment that people have regarding Fate, but for serious philosophical discussion, we will need to properly formulate this concept in clear language apart from literary devices. There are many arguments that speak about fate, and most of them try to draw a definition by comparing it to Determinism. The main tenet of Determinism is that every event has a cause. Everything that comes about can be explained in causal terms. Fatalism, on the

other hand, is the notion that everything that will ever happen will happen outside of our, the agent's, control. There are many motivations for Fatalism. These may include anything from the application of Determinism itself, from Divine Foreknowledge, or from Logic. Simply put, whatever the outcome of any situation, it was necessary and regardless of the causes or agents involved.<sup>II</sup>

The main difference between Fatalism and Determinism is that Determinism tries to operate within the framework that our actions are part of the causal scheme in which those effects that our actions cause are all linked. Fatalism seems to imply that our actions are not only incapable of affecting the outcome but that they are rendered arbitrary. Much like Cassandra of Troy, we are given the ability to see and recognize the future, but powerless to do anything to alter it.

#### Arguments for Fate: Part I

The simplest argument for Fate I have encountered is probably the easiest to see how Fate is supposed to work in our lives. Suppose you get sick. It can be whatever disease you like. Right now, you know that you will either get well or die. If you get well, then there is no need to call a doctor. You will get well, so he is not needed. If you die, then you will die and the doctor will not be able to help you. So, you still have no need for a doctor. Either way, you will not need to call the doctor. Your fate is out of his, yours, and everyone else's control.

However, clear as this is, it is also surprisingly weak. This line of argument seems to imply that there are only two pathways. One never calls the doctor to prevent a sickness that one already has. This is absurd. One calls the doctor either to prevent sickness or to cure a sickness. One may get well faster if you call the doctor (or die faster,

if you happen to get a really bad doctor). There is no solid ground here for the fatalist to move.

### Arguments for Fate: Part II

It is at this point that I wish to make a distinction about the nature of necessity. There are two different kinds of necessity. One is necessity *de dicto* and the other is necessity *de re*. De dicto necessity is the idea that some true statement is true by definition. De re necessity is the kind of necessity that refers to essential properties of something. In the sentence “all bachelors are unmarried men” is an example of de dicto necessity, while the sentence “the number 3 is a prime number” is an example of de re necessity. While both are true statements, the de re is a much more serious kind of necessity that speaks on facts about things in the world, pointing out its essential properties, rather than definitional truth. <sup>III</sup>

Now, armed with knowledge of necessity, we will turn to Aristotle’s famous Logical Fatalism. Aristotle argued that if the law of bivalence is true, namely that any proposition is either true or false, then statements about the future must also be either true or false. If statements about the future already have a truth value, then if a future statement is true or false then it is true or false necessarily. If it is already true or false necessarily, then the outcome predicted by the statement is necessary.

The simplest answer to this one was, as Aristotle found it, to simply deny bivalence for future statements. They are not already true or false, but will become true or false as the events they foretell come to pass (or not, as the case may be.) However, this is unnecessary. As it was explained by Dr. Tim Cleveland and others, such a drastic call need not be the case.

Instead, if we recall our definitions on necessity, we can see that Aristotle is trying to assert that bivalence implies *de re* necessity. This is not supported by the argument. While we see that the argument for Logical Fatalism implies that if something is true, then it is true necessarily, this is only in a *de dicto* sense. It is only necessarily true by definition of what it is to be a true statement. If a statement is true, then by definition, it is necessary that such a statement be true. But if we say that a statement about the future is true, and therefore, the events predicted are true necessarily, then we have made a misstep. In this way, all we have accomplished in saying is that true statements are true by definition of being true or *de dicto* necessity. This kind of necessity is arbitrary when trying to determine the truth about events in the future. It is simply stating “If it is true that P will happen, then it is true that P will happen.” More to the point, it simply says “There will be only one possible true outcome... and the true outcome, whatever it is, will be the only one to pass.”

Furthermore, if I say the statement “The Eiffel Tower is in Paris” The truth of this statement does not imply any kind of necessity. It simply implies that there are non-essential facts about the world that make it true. Being in Paris is not an essential property of the Eiffel Tower as it would continue to be the Eiffel Tower if it were airlifted to NMSU. If we interpret bivalence in this framework, then the truth of any future statement might simply be true, but not necessarily. True statements are simply true and nothing more. With these interpretations of Aristotle’s argument, we are not committed to saying that Logical Fatalism is implied by bivalence.

Arguments for Fate: The Sisters Strike Back

The last argument I will discuss has to do with the true nature of Fatalism. The argument is this:

1. Where  $H$  is a true proposition specifying the intrinsic state of the world at some point in the past and  $L$  is a true proposition specifying what the laws of nature are, the conjunction of  $H$  and  $L$  imply that I do  $A$  today.
2. Necessarily, if the conjunction of  $H$  and  $L$  is true and entails that I do  $A$  today, then I shall do  $A$  today.
3. I am, today, unable to effect whether the conjunction of  $H$  and  $L$  is true.
4. Therefore, I am, today, unable to avoid doing  $A$ .<sup>IV</sup>

This is a very strong argument, because it relies on principles that no compatibilist would want to deny at first. To deny premise 1 is to deny determinism of which this is a restatement, denying that we can examine information about the state of the world in the past and infer from that the state of the world in the future. It is impossible to deny premise 2 unless you are a libertarian. If the laws of causation hold true for us, then when those laws claim that we shall do  $A$ , then we shall do  $A$ . Premise 3 is where the fatalist makes his move. This is the same as Aristotle envisioned, but reworded so it does not rely on de dicto necessity. Instead, it relies on the premise that we cannot effect the past or the laws of nature. The fatalistic conclusion follows.

At first, it seems as though this argument implies that fatalism is true. However, we must understand that the basic principle upon which this argument rests is the *principle of closure*: If  $S$  cannot render  $X$  false, and  $X$  entails  $Y$ , then  $S$  cannot render  $Y$  false. However, if we look at this principle closely, we see that it cannot hold true.

The reason I am unable to render H & L false is because H & L is true in virtue of the fact that I have no causal influence over the states of affairs that make them true. So, in order to understand what it would mean to be able to render them false, we are forced to turn to a principle known as the Causal Influence Principle (CIP). CIP states that S can render X false only if X is true by virtue of states of affairs over which S has some causal influence. If understood this way, then it does not follow that I have causal influence over the state of affairs by which H & L are true simply by stating that I have causal influence over whether or not A is going to occur. <sup>v</sup>

We may try to apply an example to this to clarify our point. Let's say that H & L are true and, furthermore, that H & L imply event A, which is that I will eat a chicken sandwich today. Even if I can choose not to eat a chicken sandwich today, this does not imply that I have the power to change the past or the laws of nature. If it was true yesterday that I would eat a chicken sandwich tomorrow and I cannot render this false, it does not follow that I cannot render the statement "I will eat a chicken sandwich today" false. The difference being that I have causal influence over the "today" statement that I do not have over the "past" statement.

While the previous argument might be a little unclear and imply some strangeness about the conception of true statements in the past being detached from their present time counterparts, there is one final thing I would like to say about this argument. In the end, the argument presumes a corrupted version of free will. In the formulation, it relies on the principles of causation and determinism. By invoking these principles, it implies that in order to be free, one has to be able to be free of the laws of nature and determinism, essentially that facts about the past will causally determine what I do.

However, if we remember the difference between determinism and fatalism from the opening, we will remember that causation takes into account decisions made by the agent. Part of the “intrinsic state of the world” implied by premise 1 is our own ability to make decisions, freely willed or not. This distinction makes this more of a question about whether or not Free Will and Determinism are compatible. Not Fatalism. The fatalist has failed because he has admitted that, freely willed or not, it is our decisions that have an influence over the outcomes. Not in spite of them.

In conclusion, it seems that the three sisters of fate have finally been thwarted. In the end, their hold on us is impossible to have without our decisions and actions as a central part of what will actually happen to us. The way fatalists would have us view the world is that whatever happens to us will happen independent of our wills. I have shown that, no matter what way you go, your will, free or determined, is a crucial part of what your fate will be.

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<sup>I</sup> Stewart, Michael. “Fates”, *Greek Mythology: From the Iliad to the Fall of the Last Tyrant*. <http://messenger.com/myths/bios/fates.html> (November 14, 2005)

<sup>II</sup> Solomon, Robert C. “On Fate and Fatalism” *Philosophy East and West*, vol. 53, no. 4, pp. 435-454, October 2003

<sup>III</sup> Diekemper, Joseph. “Temporal Necessity and Logical Fatalism” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, vol. 104, pp. 289-296, 2004

<sup>IV</sup> Mackie, Penelope. “Fatalism, Incompatibilism, and the Power To Do Otherwise” *Noûs*, vol. 37, no. 4, pp. 672-689, December 2003

<sup>V</sup> Mackie, Penelope. “Fatalism, Incompatibilism, and the Power To Do Otherwise” *Noûs*, vol. 37, no. 4, pp. 672-689, December 2003