

Foreknowledge and fatalism

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1 Fatalism

Fatalist views of various sorts are views to the effect that, in some sense or other, no one has a choice about his acts, or is able to act other than he actually does. We've already encountered one sort of fatalist: a theorist who holds that determinism is true, and that for that reason we could not have acted otherwise than we in fact do. Now we'll be interested in *theological fatalism*: the view that we cannot act freely, because God has foreknowledge of our actions, and divine foreknowledge is inconsistent with free will.

A good way into theological fatalism is with an argument for purely 'logical fatalism': the view that we can show on purely logical grounds that none of our future actions is free. Consider the following argument for fatalism:

It is a necessary truth that, for every proposition, either it is or its negation is true; because this is a necessary truth, it could not have been otherwise, and there's nothing you can do to change it. So, in the past it was either true or false that you would leave class early today — suppose you will not. So, it's now necessary that you will not leave class early today. But if this necessary, there's nothing you can do to change it, in which case your decision cannot be free.

What form does this argument have?

2 Edwards's argument for the incompatibility of free will and foreknowledge

The argument for the incompatibility of free will and divine foreknowledge discussed in the article we read for class is derived from the following discussion of divine foreknowledge in Jonathan

1. I observed before, in explaining the nature of necessity, that in things which are past, their past existence is now necessary: having already made sure of existence, it is too late for any possibility of alteration in that respect: it is now impossible that it should be otherwise than true that that thing has existed.

2. If there be any such thing as a divine foreknowledge of the volitions of free agents, that foreknowledge, by the supposition, is a thing which already has, and long ago had, existence; and so, now its existence is necessary; it is now utterly impossible to be otherwise than that this foreknowledge should be, or should have been.

3. It is also very manifest, that those things which are indissolubly connected with other things that are necessary, are themselves necessary. As that proposition whose truth is necessarily connected with another proposition, which is necessarily true, is itself necessarily true. To say otherwise, would be a contradiction: it would be in effect to say, that the connexion was indissoluble, and yet was not so, but might be broken. If that, whose existence is indissolubly connected with something whose existence is now necessary, is itself not necessary, then it may possibly not exist, notwithstanding that indissoluble connexion of its existence.—Whether the absurdity be not glaring, let the reader judge.

4. It is no less evident, that if there be a full, certain, and infallible foreknowledge of the future existence of the volitions of moral agents, then there is a certain infallible and indissoluble connexion between those events and that foreknowledge; and that therefore, by the preceding observations, those events are necessary events; being infallibly and indissolubly connected with that, whose existence already is, and so is now necessary, and cannot but have been.

This argument can be laid out as follows:

1. The past is necessary. (Premise, §1)
 2. It was true in the past that God knew all of your future actions. (Premise, §2)
 3. It is now necessary that God knows all your future actions. (1,2)
 4. Any necessary consequence of something necessary is itself necessary. (Premise, §3)
 5. Necessarily (if p is known, p is true) (Premise)
 6. If it is now necessary that it is known that you will perform some action, it is now necessary that you will perform that action. (4,5)
 7. For each of your future actions, it is now necessary that you will perform that action. (3,6)
 8. If it is now necessary that you will perform some act, you cannot do otherwise.
 9. If you cannot do otherwise than perform some act, you do not perform the act freely. (Principle of Alternate Possibilities)
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- C. None of your future actions will be free. (7,8,9)

It is important to see the contrast between this and a superficially similar argument for logical fatalism. The only mention of God is in the second premise; but it might seem that we can eliminate this reference, as follows:

1. The past is necessary.
- 2*. It was true in the past that you would not leave class early today (or substitute any other example of a free action).
3. It is now necessary that you will not leave class early today. (1,2)

Indeed, this seems like a considerable simplification of the argument, since we can now skip premises (4)-(7). Is this argument as convincing as the argument which uses divine foreknowledge?

It's also important to see the difference between a superficially similar argument which replaces premise (2) with a reference to the knowledge of a non-omniscient being, like your roommate. Surely it is possible for your roommate to occasionally know what you are going to do without this impinging upon your free will. Does the above argument rule this out? What's the difference between this version of the argument and the one which makes reference to God?

3 Responses to the argument

3.1 *The timelessness of God*

Aquinas (following Boethius) responded to this argument by denying that God exists in time. Which premise of the argument would this involve rejecting? Could the argument be recast in a way which would circumvent this objection?

3.2 *The distinction between hard and soft facts*

Recall our discussion of logical fatalism. There we said that even if we agree that it was true in 1900 that I would come to class late today, it was still up to me, just before class, to make it the case that it was false in 1900 that I come to class late. However, we said, it is hard to see how I could now make it the case that someone had different beliefs in 1900 than they had then; and, in particular, it is hard to see how I could make it the case that God could have had different beliefs in 1900 than God in fact had. But maybe we could reject this assumption; perhaps it

is now true that I could have acted in such a way that God's beliefs in 1900 would have been different. Does this make sense?

The core idea here is a distinction between 'hard' and 'soft' past facts. Hard facts are now necessary, whereas soft facts are not. Soft facts are, in some sense to be explained, facts partly about the future. The idea would be to reject premise (1) — the necessity of the past — and restrict premise (1) to hard facts in the past.

3.3 The principle of alternate possibilities

The idea that divine foreknowledge is incompatible with free will rests on the assumption (premise (8) of the above argument) that if one cannot do otherwise, one does not act freely. But Harry Frankfurt has argued against this principle, using the following sort of case:

“Suppose someone — Black, let us say — wants Jones₄ to perform a certain action. Black is prepared to go to considerable lengths to get his way, but he prefers to avoid showing his hand unnecessarily. So he waits until Jones₄ is about to make up his mind what to do, and does nothing unless it is clear to him (Black is an excellent judge of such things) that Jones₄ is going to decide to do something *other* than what he wants him to do. If it does become clear that Jones₄ is going to decide to do something else, Black takes effective steps to ensure that Jones₄ decides to do, and that he does do, what he wants him to do.

...

Now suppose that Black never has to show his hand because Jones₄, for reasons of his own, decides to perform and does perform the very action Black wants him to perform. In that case, it seems clear, Jones₄ will bear precisely the same moral responsibility for what he does as he would have borne if Black had not been ready to take steps to ensure that he do it. It would be quite unreasonable to excuse Jones₄ for his action ... on the basis of the fact that he could not have done otherwise. This fact played no role at all in leading him to act as he did. ... Indeed, everything happened just as it would have happened without Black's presence in the situation and without his readiness to intrude into it.”

Frankfurt's example has to do with moral responsibility. Does it show anything about free will?

If the Principle of Alternate Possibilities is false, does that show that free will is compatible with determinism? Why this seems to lead to a dilemma for the religious believer who wants to believe in divine foreknowledge and use free will to solve the problem of evil.

3.4 Giving up divine foreknowledge

Suppose that God does not know in advance what we are going to do. Does that imply that God fails to know some facts? How could that be? Would that imply that God lacked some perfection? Does this idea threaten any traditional religious doctrines?