

Fate,  
foreknowledge,  
&  
free will

Our main topic for today is the relationship between fate, foreknowledge, and freedom of the will. But, before we turn to that, let's finish up our discussion of the problem of evil.

Let's turn to some ways of developing the argument from evil to which the free will defense does not seem to offer a solution.

These versions of the argument grant that the existence of God is consistent with the existence of **some** evil - and therefore grant that Mackie's argument to the contrary is unsuccessful - but argue that the existence of God is inconsistent with the **amount** and **type** of evil that we find in the world.

One kind of evil we observe in the world which is immediately problematic from the point of view of the free will defense is **natural evil**: evil which is not directly caused by human free actions. The suffering which results from various natural disasters is an obvious and important example of evil of this kind.

It is worth noting that many of the examples on which we naturally focus are actually mixed cases: cases in which the natural disaster in question is partly the result of human free action, and partly not. So, for example, though Hurricane Katrina was a natural disaster, its effects were certainly made worse through poor management of the relief effort and insufficient protection for the city; perhaps hurricanes are made more violent by human-caused climate change; etc. But it is very implausible that we can explain all of the evil which results from natural disasters in this way; it is presumably true that there would be hurricanes, volcanoes, and earthquakes without human intervention, just as these events occurred many times before human beings were on the scene.

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The argument from natural evil		
1	God exists.	
2	If God exists, then God is omnipotent.	
3	If something is omnipotent, then it can bring about any state of affairs such that it is possible that it brings that state of affairs about.	
4	If God exists, then God can bring about any state of affairs such that it is possible that God brings that state of affairs about.	2, 3
5	If God exists, then God is wholly good.	
6	If something is wholly good, it always eliminates as much evil as it can eliminate without limiting the free will of any being.	
7	If God exists, then God eliminates as much evil as God can eliminate without limiting the free will of any being.	5, 6
8	If God exists, then God eliminates all evil such that (i) it is possible that God eliminates that evil and (ii) doing so would not interfere with the free will of any being.	4, 7
9	If God exists, then there is no evil such that (i) it is possible that God eliminates that evil and (ii) doing so would not interfere with the free will of any being.	8
10	There is no evil such that (i) it is possible that God eliminates that evil and (ii) doing so would not interfere with the free will of any being.	1, 9
11	Some evil exists which is such that (i) it is possible that God eliminates that evil and (ii) doing so would not interfere with the free will of any being.	
C	There is and is not evil which is such that (i) it is possible that God eliminates that evil and (ii) doing so would not interfere with the free will of any being.	10, 11

This argument is a bit of a mouthful. But it is, structurally, just like the earlier versions of the argument. Moreover, the conclusion of the argument is still a contradiction, so, given that it is valid, it must still have a false premise. As before, the theist cannot reject 1, 2, or 5, and hence must reject 3, 6, or 11. But it now seems very hard to reject 3; and the free will defense does not seem to give us any reason for rejecting premise 6.



## The argument from natural evil

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One might, then, think of rejecting 11. This is Plantinga's strategy, which might be paraphrased as follows:

Though earthquakes and the like are not the result of human free actions, they are the result of the free actions of nonhuman agents, like fallen angels. So the free will defense applies to these events just as directly as to events caused by human choices.

Plantinga does not think that he knows this to be true; but he does think that it is true for all we know, and hence allows the theist to have a way of blocking the argument from natural evil.

But there are other ways of responding to this argument, all of which focus on premises 6 and 11.

### The argument from natural evil: the key premises

- 6 If something is wholly good, it always eliminates as much evil as it can eliminate without limiting the free will of any being.
- 11 Some evil exists which is such that (i) it is possible that God eliminates that evil and (ii) doing so would not interfere with the free will of any being.

But there are other ways of responding to this argument, all of which focus on premises 6 and 11.

van Inwagen (in the other optional reading) develops a response along the following lines:

Though earthquakes and the like are not caused by human free actions, our inability to avoid the harm caused by them is. In particular, the event of human beings removing themselves from the care of God - an event symbolized in the Judaeo-Christian tradition by the story of the Garden of Eden - placed human beings in a world in which they were subject to natural forces which they were then unable to avoid.

To which of the above premises is van Inwagen objecting?

It seems that he must be objecting mainly to 6. After all, even if van Inwagen's story were true, God could still stop natural disasters from happening without interfering with human free will, right?

The idea instead seems to be that part of the value of free will comes from one's having responsibility for the effects of one's actions. And, if God were to, in general, stop bad consequences of free actions, this would remove that responsibility.

However, it seems that the proponent of the argument from natural evil might have a way of responding to this sort of objection; perhaps they can modify the key premises of their argument as follows:

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#### The argument from natural evil, version 2: the key premises

6 If something is wholly good, it always eliminates as much evil as it can eliminate without limiting the free will of any being if that evil is not the result of any human free action.

11 Some evil exists which is such that (i) it is possible that God eliminates that evil and (ii) doing so would not interfere with the free will of any being, or the results of the free actions of any being.

But are there any evils of the sort described in (11)?

A plausible example would be the suffering of animals in times before the existence of human beings. You might want to think about how, if at all, the sort of story van Inwagen tells could be adapted to that sort of example.

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The basic version of the argument from evil focuses on the existence of **some** evil in the world. As we have seen, the argument can be made more challenging if we focus on the existence of particular **types** of evil. It can also be made more challenging if we focus on the **amount** of evil we find in the world - either the total amount, or the amount a single individual may have to suffer.

Considering the amounts of evil we find, one might well ask: even if free will is a good, **is it really that good?** Is it good enough that it justified all of the suffering we find in the world?

We'll return to this question, and the more fundamental question of whether and why free will is good at all, when we discuss the paradoxes of omniscience and omnipotence.



Let's now turn to our main topic for today: the relationship between fate, foreknowledge, and freedom of the will.

A few classes ago we discussed the relationship between free will and the thesis of determinism; for reasons we have discussed, the thesis of determinism has often been thought to pose a challenge to the reality of free will.

But there is even an older challenge to the possibility of freedom: the challenge from **fate**. To say that our actions are fated is to say that it is already true now that we will do certain things in the future. It is important to see that believing in truths about the future does not involve believing that determinism is true; to simply say that there are truths about the future, one needn't think that the laws of nature are deterministic.

But many have thought that recognition of truths about the future is enough to move us to adopt the attitude that Taylor (in the optional reading) calls **fatalism**:

"The fatalist, then is someone who believes that whatever happens is and always was unavoidable. He thinks that it is not up to him what will happen a thousand years hence, next year, tomorrow, or the very next moment."

What we want to know is: why might one adopt this fatalistic attitude in response to reflection on the existence of truths about the future?

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Let's first discuss the main points of the story, before asking what the story shows about freedom of the will.

The story begins with the writing of an interesting book:

Let us suppose that God has revealed a particular set of facts to a chosen scribe who, believing (correctly) that they came from God, wrote them all down. The facts in question then turned out to be all the more or less significant episodes in the life of some perfectly ordinary man named Osmo. ... The book was published but attracted no attention, because it appeared to be nothing more than the record of the dull life of a very plain man named Osmo....

The book eventually found its way into various libraries, where it gathered dust until one day a high school teacher in Indiana, who rejoiced under the name of Osmo, saw a copy on the shelf.

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...Osmo, with the book pressed tightly under his arm, dashed across the street for some coffee, thinking to compose himself and then examine the book with care. ... Osmo became absolutely engrossed ... he sat drinking coffee and reliving his childhood, much of which he had all but forgotten until the memories were revived by the book now before him. He had almost forgotten about the kitten, for example, until he read this observation: "Sobbing, Osmo takes Fluffy, now quite dead, and buries her next to the rose bush."

Osmo then turns later in the book:

.. it occurred to him to turn to Chapter 26, to see what might be said there, he having recently turned 26. He had no sooner done so than his panic returned, for what the book said was *true*! That it rains on his birthday, for example, that his wife fails to give him the binoculars he had hinted he would like like, and so on ... How, Osmo pondered, could anyone know that apparently before it happened? For these were quit recent events, and the book had dust on it. Quickly moving on, Osmo came to this: "Sitting and reading in the coffee shop across from the library, Osmo, perspiring copiously, entirely forgets, until it is too late, that he was supposed to collect his wife at the hairdresser's at four."



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Disregarding his wife's plight, Osmo continues:

it now occurred to him to check the number of chapters in this amazing book: only twenty-nine! But surely, he thought, that doesn't mean anything ... no one could possibly know how long this or that person is going to live. ... So he read along, although not without considerable uneasiness and even depression. ... But then the book ended on a terribly dismal note. It said: "And Osmo, having taken Northwest flight 569 from O'Hare, perishes when the aircraft crashes on the runway at Fort Wayne, with considerable loss of life, a tragedy rendered the more calamitous by the fact that Osmo had neglected to renew his life insurance." And that was all. That was the end of the book.

So *that's* why it had only twenty-nine chapters. Some idiot thought he was going to get killed in a plane crash. But, Osmo thought, he just wouldn't get on the plane.

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(About three years later our hero, having boarded a flight for St. Paul, went berserk when the pilot announced that they were going to land at Ft. Wayne instead. According to one of the flight attendants, he tried to hijack the aircraft and divert it to another airfield. The Civil Aeronautics Board cited the resulting disruptions as contributing to the crash that followed as the plane tried to land.)

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First, we should ask: why did Osmo come to believe that he had no free will?

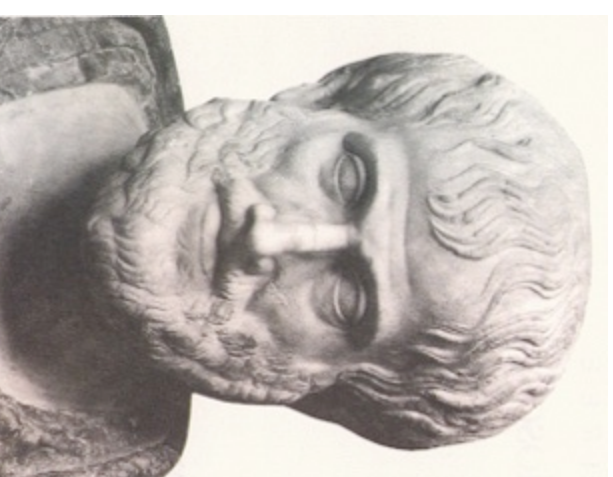
The answer is pretty clear: he came to believe this on the basis of reading a book which detailed his future, and which was such that all of its predictions ended up being true. But of course he did not know anything about the book other than that all of its predictions were true; so his evidence was really just that there was a collection of truths about his future.

Second, was Osmo justified in believing that he lacked free will? And was he right?

Third - if you think that Osmo was right - we can ask: are we any different than Osmo? If so, how?

As mentioned, the story of Osmo is a nice way to bring out the intuitive challenge to freedom of the will from the existence of truths about the future. But is there any way to turn this intuitive challenge into a genuine argument?

In fact, arguments of this sort, and concerns about what they show, are almost as old as philosophy itself. One prominent argument of this sort can be found in the writings of Aristotle.



... if all propositions whether positive or negative are either true or false, then any given predicate must either belong to the subject or not, so that if one man affirms that an event of a given character will take place and another denies it, it is plain that the statement of the one will correspond with reality and that of the other will not. For the predicate cannot both belong and not belong to the subject at one and the same time with regard to the future.

Thus, if it is true to say that a thing is white, it must necessarily be white; if the reverse proposition is true, it will of necessity not be white. Again, if it is white, the proposition stating that it is white was true; if it is not white, the proposition to the opposite effect was true. And if it is not white, the man who states that it is making a false statement; and if the man who states that it is white is making a false statement, it follows that it is not white. It may therefore be argued that it is necessary that affirmations or denials must be either true or false.

Now if this be so, nothing is or takes place fortuitously, either in the present or in the future, and there are no real alternatives; everything takes place of necessity and is fixed. ...



The conclusion of the argument Aristotle is considering is clear enough: he says that **if this be so, there are no real alternatives; everything takes place of necessity.**

But what are the premises from which this conclusion is supposed to follow?



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In the **first paragraph** of this passage, Aristotle considers the claim that every proposition - every claim - must be either true or false. Here he seems particularly interested in propositions about the future: claims that some event will take place.

The key claim here seems to be that if one man affirms that an event will happen and another denies it, one of the two must be speaking truly. That is, if E is some future event:

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In the **second paragraph**, Aristotle says that there is a certain connection between truth and necessity; the central claim here seems to be that if it is true that something has a property, then it necessarily has that property. So, applying that to our example,

**If it is true that E will happen, then necessarily E will happen.**

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1. Either it is true that E will happen, or it is true that E will not happen.
2. If it is true that E will happen, then necessarily E will happen.
3. If it is true that E will not happen, then necessarily E will not happen.

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C. Either it is necessary that E will happen, or it is necessary that E will not happen. (1, 2, 3)

This already seems to be enough to get us to Aristotle's conclusion: the claim that whatever will happen will happen of necessity.

Is this argument valid? What is the form of the argument?

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One might see it as having this form:

P or Q  
If P, then R  
If Q, then S

---

R or S

This is a valid form of argument; whatever sentences you substitute in for P, Q, R, and S, you will get an argument which is such that its premises guarantee its conclusion - i.e., if its premises are true, its conclusion always will be as well.



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Is this argument valid? What is the form of the argument?

And if the conclusion of this argument is true, then, as Aristotle says, it seems that there are no real alternatives. If it is necessary that I will eat pizza for dinner, and hence impossible that I not eat pizza, how can **not** eating pizza be a real alternative for me?

It thus seems that Aristotle provides us with an argument against the possibility of free will which does not rely on any assumptions at all about the laws of nature, but which instead seems to rely only on purely logical principles about truth.

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Let's take a closer look at this argument. Assuming it is valid, one can reject the conclusion only by rejecting one of the premises. Let's consider the first premise. Can one reject Aristotle's assumption that either the claim that something will happen, or the claim that it will not happen, is true?

Later in the passage Aristotle gives an argument against this response to premise 1:

Again, to say that neither the affirmation nor the denial is true, maintaining, let us say, that an event neither will take place nor will not take place, is to take up a position impossible to defend. ... if an event is neither to take place nor not to take place the next day ... it would be necessary that a sea-fight should neither take place nor fail to take place on the next day.

This argument seems to run as follows: suppose that premise 1 is false. Then it is not true that either it is true that E will happen or true that E will not happen. So, it is not true that E will happen and not true that E will not happen. But this is a contradiction; hence our initial supposition must be false.

We can think of this as a *reductio* of the claim that the first premise is false, and hence as an argument for the truth of the first premise:

1	Not (it is true that E will happen or it is true that E will not happen)	assumed for reductio
2	If Not (p or q) then Not-p and Not-q	
3	Not (it is true that E will happen) & Not (it is true that E will not happen)	1, 2
4	It is not true that E will happen & it is not true that E will not happen	3
5	If it is not true that E will not happen, then it is true that E will happen	
C	It is not true that E will happen & it is true that E will happen	4, 5

This looks like a powerful defense of the first premise. Can we plausibly escape Aristotle's argument by rejecting the second or third premise, instead?

1. Either it is true that E will happen, or it is true that E will not happen.
  2. If it is true that E will happen, then necessarily E will happen.
  3. If it is true that E will not happen, then necessarily E will not happen.
- 

C. Either it is necessary that E will happen, or it is necessary that E will not happen. (1, 2, 3)

It thus seems that Aristotle provides us with an argument against the possibility of free will which does not rely on any assumptions at all about the laws of nature, but which instead seems to rely only on purely logical principles about truth.

This looks like a powerful defense of the first premise. Can we plausibly escape Aristotle's argument by rejecting the second or third premise, instead?

At first glance, premises 2 and 3 look difficult to deny. After all, there does seem to be a necessary connection between truth and what is the case - isn't it impossible for it to be true that E will happen without E happening? And isn't this just what the second premise says?

Not quite. In fact, both premises 2 and 3 are ambiguous between two importantly different interpretations.

Let's look at premise 2. Here are two things that premise 2 might mean:

2A. The following claim is a necessary truth: if it is true that E will happen, then E will happen.

2B. If it is true that E will happen, then the following is necessary: E will happen.

Let's look at these two interpretations, beginning with 2B. Let's suppose that it is true that I will end class at 1:49 today. Does this imply that it is **necessary** that I will end class at 1:49 today - i.e., that it is **impossible** that I not end class at 1:49 today?

It doesn't seem so; if we don't already think that it is impossible for some event not to happen, why should learning that it is true that it will happen change our minds? Can't some claims be true, without being necessary?

So it seems that if premise 2 of Aristotle's argument is to be understood as 2B, then this premise is false.

So let's see if, instead, 2A might better serve Aristotle's argument.

1. Either it is true that E will happen, or it is true that E will not happen.

2. If it is true that E will happen, then necessarily E will happen.

3. If it is true that E will not happen, then necessarily E will not happen.

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C. Either it is necessary that E will happen, or it is necessary that E will not happen. (1, 2, 3)

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~~2B. If it is true that E will happen, then the following is necessary: E will happen.~~

So let's see if, instead, 2A might better serve Aristotle's argument.

2A, unlike 2B, seems to be true, which is of course good for Aristotle's argument.

The problem with 2A is not that it is false, but that when we understand premise 2 in this way, Aristotle's argument turns out to be **invalid**.

Consider the following form of argument:

p

The following is a necessary truth: if p, then q

---

Necessarily, q

Is this argument valid? Can you think of any sentences you can substitute in for "p" and "q" which make the premises true and the conclusion false?



1. Either it is true that E will happen, or it is true that E will not happen.

2. If it is true that E will happen, then necessarily E will happen.

3. If it is true that E will not happen, then necessarily E will not happen.

---

C. Either it is necessary that E will happen, or it is necessary that E will not happen. (1, 2, 3)

How about:

Grass is green

The following is a necessary truth: if grass is green, then grass is green

---

Necessarily, Grass is green.

Are the premises of this argument true? How about the conclusion? What does this show about the form of argument we are discussing?

Let's now apply this lesson to Aristotle's argument.

Let's look at premise 2. Here are two things that premise 2 might mean:

2A. The following claim is a necessary truth: if it is true that E will happen, then E will happen.

~~2B. If it is true that E will happen, then the following is necessary: E will happen.~~

So let's see if, instead, 2A might better serve Aristotle's argument.

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1. Either it is true that E will happen, or it is true that E will not happen.
  2. If it is true that E will happen, then necessarily E will happen.
  3. If it is true that E will not happen, then necessarily E will not happen.
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C. Either it is necessary that E will happen, or it is necessary that E will not happen. (1, 2, 3)

Why, exactly, did we think that Aristotle's argument was valid in the first place? That was because we took it to be of the form:

P or Q  
If P, then R  
If Q, then S

---

R or S

But if we interpret 2 as 2A, it is **not** of this form. Can you see why? What would "P" and "R" be?

Let's look at premise 2. Here are two things that premise 2 might mean:

2A. The following claim is a necessary truth: if it is true that E will happen, then E will happen.

2A, unlike 2B, seems to be true, which is of course good for Aristotle's argument.

The problem with 2A is not that it is false, but that when we understand premise 2 in this way, Aristotle's argument turns out to be **invalid**.

Consider the following form of argument:

p  
The following is a necessary truth: if p, then q  

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Necessarily, q

Let's now apply this lesson to Aristotle's argument.

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But if we interpret 2 as 2A, it is **not** of this form. Can you see why? What would "P" and "R" be?

2A. The following claim is a necessary truth: if it is true that E will happen, then E will happen.

Rather, if we interpret 2 as 2A (and 3 in the same way) the argument is of this form:

P or Q  
Necessarily, if P, then R  
Necessarily, if Q, then S

---

Necessarily R or necessarily S

And this is **not** valid.

Summing up: it seems that we have two interpretations of Aristotle's premise 2. On interpretation 2A, the premise is true, but the argument is invalid. On interpretation 2B, the premise is false. So **neither interpretation makes the argument sound**.

So it seems that the argument we found in Aristotle is not convincing. But perhaps this is because we have not correctly interpreted the argument with which Aristotle was concerned.

A different interpretation would be that Aristotle had in mind an argument often attributed to another Greek philosopher during the 4th century B.C., Diodorus Cronus, which in antiquity was called the "Master Argument."

A different interpretation would be that Aristotle had in mind an argument often attributed to another Greek philosopher during the 4th century B.C., Diodorus Cronus, which in antiquity was called the “Master Argument.”

Little is known of the life of Cronus, and none of his writings survive. But the Master Argument was much discussed in antiquity; one important summary of the argument was given by Epictetus, a Greek philosopher who lived in the 1st and 2nd centuries A.D., in his *Discourses*.

The argument . . . appears to have been proposed from such principles as these: there is in fact a common contradiction between one another in these three positions, each two being in contradiction to the third. The propositions are, that everything past must of necessity be true; that an impossibility does not follow a possibility; and that something is possible which neither is nor will be true. Diodorus observing this contradiction employed the probative force of the first two for the demonstration of this proposition, “That nothing is possible which is not true and never will be.”



Epictetus isolates three propositions:

- E1. Everything past is necessary.
- E2. An impossibility cannot follow from a possibility.
- E3. Something is possible which is not and will not be true.

According to Epictetus, Diodorus tried to show that E1 and E2 imply the falsity of E3. What would it mean for E3 to be false? If it is not true that something is possible which is not and will not be true, it follows that everything which is and will be true is necessary - which is just the conclusion for which Aristotle aimed.

Our question then is: how can E1 and E2 be used to show that the future is necessary?

E1. Everything past is necessary.

E2. An impossibility cannot follow from a possibility.

E3. Something is possible which is not and will not be true.

According to Epictetus, Diodorus tried to show that E1 and E2 imply the falsity of E3. What would it mean for E3 to be false? If it is not true that something is possible which is not and will not be true, it follows that everything which is and will be true is necessary - which is just the conclusion for which Aristotle aimed.

Our question then is: how can E1 and E2 be used to show that the future is necessary?

A good way to approach this question is by recalling the first premise of Aristotle's argument:

1. **Either it is true that E will happen, or it is true that E will not happen.**

Recall that Aristotle argued that denying this led to contradiction; so this claim must be not just true at the present moment, but also true at every moment, since truths of logic are eternally true. So the following must be true:

PAST-1. **In the past it was either true that E will happen, or it was true that E will not happen.**

PAST-1, together with Epictetus' claim E1, seems to imply:

NEC-1. **Either it is necessary that it is true that E will happen, or it is necessary that it is true that E will not happen.**

But we now have the makings of an argument for the conclusion of the argument Aristotle discussed. Consider premises 2 and 3 of Aristotle's argument, under interpretation 2A:

2A. **It is necessary that: if it is true that E will happen, then E will happen.**

3A. **It is necessary that: if it is true that E will not happen, then E will not happen.**



## An interpretation of the Master Argument of Diodorus Cronus

PAST-1. In the past it was either true that E will happen, or it was true that E will not happen.

E1. Everything past is necessary.

NEC-1. Either it is necessary that it is true that E will happen, or it is necessary that it is true that E will not happen.

2A. It is necessary that: if it is true that E will happen, then E will happen. (PAST-1, E1)

3A. It is necessary that: if it is true that E will not happen, then E will not happen.

---

C. Either it is necessary that E will happen, or it is necessary that E will not happen. (NEC-1, 2A, 3A)

This argument is quite similar to the argument we found in Aristotle. It has exactly the same conclusion, and uses two of the same premises (on one interpretation), 2A and 3A. But this argument seems to succeed where Aristotle's failed, because of two additions.

These are, first, premise E1, which says that the past is necessary, and, second, that the first premise assumes not just that either it is true that E will happen or that E will not happen, but that this was also true in the past. (This is the difference between premise 1 in Aristotle's argument and PAST-1 above.)

The second assumption seems quite plausible. How about the first assumption, that the past is necessary?

This might at first seem odd; couldn't you have decided to skip class today? And doesn't this mean that a certain past event, namely your coming to class, is not necessary?

It certainly seems so. But when the ancients used "necessary" in arguments of this sort, they meant something a little broader than we have meant. They meant something like: "outside of my control" or "true no matter what I do." On this interpretation, it looks like E1 is quite plausible - for just the reasons discussed in connection with van Inwagen's consequence argument.

## An interpretation of the Master Argument of Diodorus Cronus

PAST-1. In the past it was either true that E will happen, or it was true that E will not happen.

E1. Everything past is necessary.

NEC-1. Either it is necessary that it is true that E will happen, or it is necessary that it is true that E will not happen.

2A. It is necessary that: if it is true that E will happen, then E will happen. (PAST-1, E1)

3A. It is necessary that: if it is true that E will not happen, then E will not happen.

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C. Either it is necessary that E will happen, or it is necessary that E will not happen. (NEC-1, 2A, 3A)

So it seems that we have good reason to believe PAST-1, E1, 2A, and 3A - and these are all of the independent premises in the argument. But remember the worry we had about Aristotle's argument using 2A and 3A: the worry there was not that a premise was false, but that the argument was **invalid**. Does the conclusion of the Master Argument really follow from NEC-1, 2A, and 3A?

This last step of the argument seems to be of this form:

Necessarily P or necessarily Q

Necessarily (if P then R)

Necessarily (if Q then S)

---

Necessarily R or necessarily S

Is this valid? How might you argue that it is, or is not?

How about the earlier step from PAST-1 and E1 to NEC-1? Does its being true in the past that either P or Q imply that either P was true in the past or the Q was true in the past? Does this matter?

## An interpretation of the Master Argument of Diodorus Cronus

PAST-1. In the past it was either true that E will happen, or it was true that E will not happen.

E1. Everything past is necessary.

NEC-1. Either it is necessary that it is true that E will happen, or it is necessary that it is true that E will not happen.

2A. It is necessary that: if it is true that E will happen, then E will happen. (PAST-1, E1)

3A. It is necessary that: if it is true that E will not happen, then E will not happen.

---

C. Either it is necessary that E will happen, or it is necessary that E will not happen. (NEC-1, 2A, 3A)

The Master Argument seems to provide a serious challenge to the reality of free will - and one which only assumes that the past is out of our control, along with some plausible-seeming logical principles.

It is hard to know how to respond to this argument. It appears valid, and it has only four independent premises: PAST-1, E1, and 2A and 3A. 2A and 3A seem trivially true. This means that if we want to defend the reality of free will, we have just two options.

First, we can deny premise E1: **we can say that, in at least some cases, we have control now over how things were in the past.** We'll consider this line of reply further below.

Second, **we can deny that there are any truths about the future.** In the context of the above argument, this involves denying the first premise, PAST-1.

An interpretation of the Master Argument of Diodorus Cronus

PAST-1. In the past it was either true that E will happen, or it was true that E will not happen.

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Second, **we can deny that there are any truths about the future**. In the context of the above argument, this involves denying the first premise, PAST-1.

But remember the defense we considered of premise 1 of Aristotle's argument:

1	Not (it is true that E will happen or it is true that E will not happen)	assumed for reductio
2	If Not (p or q) then Not-p and Not-q	
3	Not (it is true that E will happen) & Not (it is true that E will not happen)	1, 2
4	It is not true that E will happen & it is not true that E will not happen	3
5	If it is not true that E will not happen, then it is true that E will happen	
C	It is not true that E will happen & it is true that E will happen	4, 5

But the same sort of argument can be given in favor of PAST-1:

1	Not (it was true in the past that E will happen or it was true in the past that E will not happen)	assumed for reductio
2	If Not (p or q) then Not-p and Not-q	
3	Not (it was true in the past that E will happen) & Not (it was true in the past that E will not happen)	1, 2
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5	If it was not true in the past that E will not happen, then it was true in the past that E will happen	
C	It was not true in the past that E will happen & it was true in the past that E will happen.	4, 5

However, let's think a bit more closely about this style of argument. In particular, let's think about premise 5.

If we deny that there are any truths about the future, we should not, it seems, begin to think that every claim about the future is for that reason **false**. After all, if the claim that E will happen is false, then it seems to follow that E will not happen - but this, just as much as the claim that E will happen, is a claim about the future.

Rather, it seems, we should think of claims about the future as simply lacking a truth-value - as "indeterminate." If we think of them this way, then it seems that we should reject the rule of classical logic known as the **Law of the Excluded Middle** - which says that for any proposition P, either P or not-P must be true.



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PAST-1. In the past it was either true that E will happen, or it was true that E will not happen.

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Rather, it seems, we should think of claims about the future as simply lacking a truth-value - as “indeterminate.” If we think of them this way, then it seems that we should reject the rule of classical logic known as the **Law of the Excluded Middle** - which says that for any proposition P, either P or not-P must be true.

And if we give up the Law of the Excluded Middle, we will want to reject the idea that not-not-P implies P - the rule of **double-negation elimination**. This has two consequences for the proposed reductio argument in favor of PAST-1.

First, and more simply, if we reject double-negation elimination, then we can reject premise 5.

Second, if we reject double-negation elimination, then reductio ad absurdum is not, in general, a legitimate form of argument. Can you see why? (Think of a reductio argument as an attempt to show that P is true by showing that not-P is not true.)

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C. Either it is necessary that E will happen, or it is necessary that E will not happen. (NEC-1, 2A, 3A)

Thus it seems that we can escape the Master Argument against the possibility of free will if we are willing to give up the idea that there are truths about the future (and, in so doing, also give up the Law of the Excluded Middle).

It is worth noting a connection between this sort of response to the Master Argument and an argument we have already discussed: McTaggart's proof of the unreality of time. Remember that in response to that argument, we saw that one possible view was to adopt a B-theory of time, and deny that there are any simple properties of being past, present, or future (other than past, present, or future, relative to a certain time in the B-series). If we adopt this view, then it does not seem as though we can deny that there are any truths about the future while accepting that there are truths about the past and present.

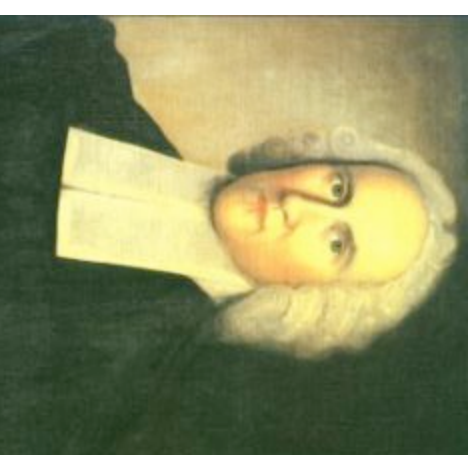
Further, this sort of response to the challenge fate poses to free will runs into an obvious complication in a theological setting. After all, a traditional attribute of God is omniscience - and this is taken to include knowledge of the future, including future human free actions. But if God **knows** things about the future, doesn't it follow that there must be **truths** about the future? And, if so, it looks like PAST-1 will be true, leaving us without a response to the Master Argument.

In fact, matters are worse than this. As Jonathan Edwards shows in the reading for today, divine foreknowledge raises its own problems for the possibility of free will.

In fact, matters are worse than this. As Jonathan Edwards shows in the reading for today, divine foreknowledge raises its own problems for the possibility of free will.

Edwards was an 18th century American philosopher, theologian and preacher, perhaps best known now for his sermon, "Sinners in the Hands of An Angry God."

Edwards lays out his argument in four numbered paragraphs, each of which corresponds to a premise in his argument. The first is this one:



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.

In other words:

1. We have no choice about past events.

## Edwards' argument for the incompatibility of free will and divine foreknowledge

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.

1. We have no choice about past events.

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.

What is Edwards saying here?

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1. We have no choice about past events.

2. In the past, God had foreknowledge of our future actions.

Premises 1 and 2 of Edwards' argument obviously imply a further claim about the status of God's foreknowledge of our actions.



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1. We have no choice about past events.

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3. We have no choice about God's knowing that in the future I will perform a certain action.

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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:

- 
1. We have no choice about past events.
  2. In the past, God had foreknowledge of our future actions.
  3. We have no choice about God's knowing that in the future I will perform a certain action.

As elsewhere, Edwards is using “necessary” to mean, in part “beyond our control” or “something we don’t have any choice about.” If we focus on this, then Edwards’ point here looks very similar to one of the key premises in the consequence argument for the incompatibilism of free will and determinism: the no choice principle.

4. If we have no choice about p, and no choice about the fact that if p, then q, then we have no choice about q.

## Edwards' argument for the incompatibility of free will and divine foreknowledge

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:

1. We have no choice about past events.

2. In the past, God had foreknowledge of our future actions.

3. We have no choice about God's knowing that in the future I will perform a certain action.

4. If we have no choice about p, and no choice about the fact that if p, then q, then we have no choice about q.

There is one more premise in Edwards' argument which needs discussion.

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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;

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Edwards is saying that there is an **indissoluble** connection between something being known, and its being true. An indissoluble connection is one that cannot be broken - i.e., a connection which is impossible to break. Another way to put this is to say that the connection between something being known and its being true is a necessary one.

For our purposes, what is important is that **if something is a necessary truth, it is not something that we have any choice about**. We don't, for example, have any choice about the fact that there are no round squares -- and this is precisely because it is impossible for there to be any round squares. And this is just another way of saying that it is a necessary truth that there aren't any.



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So let's suppose we grant Edwards' claim that

Necessarily, if someone knows that p, then p.

It seems to follow from this, given what we have just said, that the following is also true:

5. We have no choice about the fact that if God knows that we will perform some action, then we will perform that action.

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But now focus on premises 3, 4, and 5.

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But now focus on premises 3, 4, and 5.

Premise 3 mentions something that we have no choice about.

Premise 5 says that if we have no choice about that thing, then we have no choice about our future actions.

Premise 4 says that if both those things are the case, then we also have no choice about our future actions.

Therefore, it seems to follow from premises 3-5 that:

C. We have no choice about whether we will perform some future action.

But of course, if this is true, then we have no free will.

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This argument is similar in form to the consequence argument. In that argument we assumed that determinism is true and derived the result that we have no choice about future actions. That argument, if successful, established the conditional claim that **if** determinism is true, **then** we have no free will.

In **this** argument we assume not that determinism is true, but rather that God knows what actions we will perform in the future. From this assumption we derived the result that we have no choice about future actions. **So this argument, if successful, establishes the conditional claim that if God knows of our future actions, then we have no free will.**

Most traditional Christian views, as well as the views of many other religions, hold both that we have free will, and that God knows in advance what we are going to do. To defend this view, one needs to find a flaw in Edwards' argument.

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On the face of it, there are four premises which one might reject: 1, 2, 4, and 5. But it is worth noting at the outset that there is an immediate problem, from the point of view of the religious believer, with rejecting premise 4.

One of the important aspects of free will, from the point of religious belief, is that it promises to explain the existence of certain sorts of evil in the world. But, as we noted in our discussion of the free will defense, this sort of explanation only makes sense if free will is incompatible with determinism.

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The problem which arises is that premise 4 is a crucial premise in the main argument for incompatibilism. So if the religious believer tries to solve the problem created by Edwards' argument by rejecting premise 4 of that argument, she also weakens substantially the case for incompatibilism, and thereby weakens substantially the free will defense as a reply to the problem of evil.



### **Edwards' argument for the incompatibility of free will and divine foreknowledge**

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In what follows, I will therefore just suppose that premise 4 is true. How else might one reply to Edwards' argument?

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One main problem with Aquinas' response to this argument is not that what Aquinas says about God existing outside of time is false, but that, even if he is right, there seems to be a way to reformulate Edwards' argument and still show the incompatibility of free will and divine foreknowledge.

In what follows, I will therefore just suppose that premise 4 is true. How else might one reply to Edwards' argument?

One assumption of the argument is that God knew **in the past** what we will do; and this seems to imply that God exists in time. This view of the relationship between God and time was denied by Thomas Aquinas.

### Aquinas on time and foreknowledge

"although contingent things become actual successively, nevertheless God knows contingent things not successively, as they are in their own being, as we do but simultaneously. The reason is because His knowledge is measured by eternity, as is also His being; and eternity being simultaneously whole comprises all time, as said above ... Hence all things that are in time are present to God from eternity, not only because He has the types of things present within Him, as some say; but because His glance is carried from eternity over all things as they are in their presentality."

If Aquinas is right about this, then it looks like premise 2 of Edwards' argument is false.

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Here is one way such a reformulation might work. We might restate premises 1 and 2 so as still to derive 3. From there, the argument could go as above:

- 1\*. We have no choice about **things which are outside of time**.
- 2\*. God's knowledge of our future actions is **outside of time**.
3. We have no choice about God's having knowledge of our future actions. (1\*, 2\*)

Are premises 1\* and 2\* as plausible as the original premises 1 and 2? If so, then Aquinas' view shifts the problem of free will and foreknowledge, but does not solve it.

How might Aquinas argue that 1\*, unlike 1, is false?

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The denial of premise 1 might, at first glance, seem ridiculous. Absent time machines, how can we have power over the past?

Aquinas' objection focuses on premise 2 of Edwards' argument. A quite different reply focuses on premise 1 of Edwards' argument.

This reply to the problem of free will and foreknowledge is often associated with William of Ockham, an English philosopher and theologian who was born about 15 years after Aquinas' death, in 1288.



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To see why this might not be ridiculous, consider the overlooked philosophical problem of the incompatibility of free will and roommate foreknowledge.

It seems that sometimes, your roommate can know what you will do; for example, the following might be true:

As 10 am today, your roommate knew that you would eat a hamburger for lunch.

Now imagine that at noon you are in the dining hall, about to grab a hamburger, when you are suddenly overcome with an unlikely desire for a fish sandwich. Do you have a choice about whether you will choose the hamburger or the fish sandwich? It seems that you do. But then it also seems that you have a choice about whether your roommate, at 10 am, knew that you would eat a hamburger for lunch. After all, if you had chosen the fish sandwich, your roommate's belief that you would eat a hamburger would have been false, and hence **not** a piece of knowledge.

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But, if this story is true, it follows that you do sometimes have a choice about past events: you had a choice about whether, in the past, your roommate knew that you would eat a hamburger for lunch.

Another question you may want to consider: do you have a choice about whether, at 10 am, it was **true** that you would eat a hamburger for lunch? If so, how would this affect the Master Argument for fatalism?

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But, if this story is true, it follows that you do sometimes have a choice about past events: you had a choice about whether, in the past, your roommate knew that you would eat a hamburger for lunch.

Now can you imagine a variant of the case in which you have a choice about whether your roommate even *believed* that you would eat a hamburger for lunch?

This does not seem possible: it seems that while you do have a choice about whether your roommate at some time in the past knew something about your behavior, you do not have a choice about whether your roommate at some time in the past believed something about your behavior. This might lead you to think that there are some past events that we do have a choice about, and some that we do not. This is what Ockham thought. One might express this idea by saying that some facts about the past are **hard facts** -- facts about which we have no choice -- whereas other facts about the past are **soft facts** -- facts about which we do have a choice.

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Let's grant that there is such a distinction between hard and soft facts. For Ockham's reply to this argument to work, we need more than the idea that there is such a distinction: we also need to assume that facts about what God knows are soft facts.

At first, this might seem very plausible: after all, we have already seen that facts about what your roommate knows are soft facts. Why not then also facts about what God knows?

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At first, this might seem very plausible: after all, we have already seen that facts about what your roommate knows are soft facts. Why not then also facts about what God knows?

But think for a moment about why you had some control over whether, two hours ago, your roommate knew what you would do: this was because you had the power to do something which is such that, if you did that thing, your roommate's belief would have been false, and hence would not have been knowledge. But do we have the power to do something which is such that, if we did that thing we would have made one of God's beliefs false? This seems unlikely; it does not seem to be within our power to make God less than omniscient.

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So why might facts about what God knew 1000 years ago be soft facts, rather than hard facts? This is the key question which defenders of Ockham's solution to this problem must answer. That is, they must explain why it is the case that

Even though it is impossible for me to change the past, it is now in my power to perform some action which is such that, if I performed that action, God would have had different beliefs 1000 years ago.

The difficulty for the defender of this solution is, that is, to explain how what God believed 1000 years ago is not something which is now completely out of my control.

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The strategies of Aquinas and Ockham are each ways of trying to show that free will and divine foreknowledge are **compatible**. But one might, of course, also simply accept Edwards' argument, and say that divine foreknowledge and free will are **incompatible**.

Defenders of this position must, then, either deny that we have free will, or deny that God knows in advance what we are going to do. We have already considered some of the problems with denying the existence of free will; let's consider whether it is plausible to deny the existence of divine foreknowledge. (We're asking, of course, whether it is plausible for a religious believer to deny divine foreknowledge; atheists of course deny that there is any such thing.)

An initial problem facing this strategy is to explain why this is not simply a denial of the thesis that God is omniscient.

Here I think that one who denies divine foreknowledge should say something like this:

"To say that God is omniscient is to say that God knows all the facts. To deny that God is omniscient, then, is to say that there is at least one fact that God does not know. But I am not saying that. I am not saying that because, while I **am** saying that God does not know whether, in five minutes, I will sing the fight song, I am **not** saying that there is a fact about whether, in five minutes, I will sing the fight song. I don't think that there are such facts; indeed, I don't think that there are any facts (yet) about which free actions I will and will not perform. So, I don't think that there are any facts that God does not know."

Is this a sufficient reply to the objection?

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A second kind of worry about the denial of divine foreknowledge comes specific views which are a part of the beliefs of various religions.

In the case of Christianity, for example, various passages in both the Old and New Testaments seem to imply the existence of divine foreknowledge. Consider, for example the following well-known passage from the Gospel of Matthew, in which Jesus is speaking to Peter:

"Truly, I tell you, before the rooster crows, you will deny me three times."

One who denies divine foreknowledge seems forced into saying either that Jesus did not really know what he said, or that Peter's denial was not free. One thing to think about is whether these are the only options, and whether either of these is plausible.

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