

Handout 10

Fatalism: van Inwagen

PREVIEW. Van Inwagen's main argument may be summarised as a pair of inferences:

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- (i) If it is up to me whether to shave tomorrow (say), then it is up to me at $t' < t$ to change the truth value of a proposition 'SB shaves at t .' ($P \rightarrow Q$)
- (ii) But the proposition 'SB shaves at t ' is unchangeably true. ($\sim Q$)
- (iii) Therefore, fatalism: it is not up to me whether to shave tomorrow. ($\sim P$)

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- (i) If fatalism is true, then (at least) some propositions are unchangeably true. ($P \rightarrow Q$)
- (ii) But no sense can be made of Q . ($\sim Q$)
- (iii) Therefore, fatalism is false. ($\sim P$)

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SENSES OF FATALISM. Van Inwagen begins by distinguishing three kinds of fatalism:

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A-fatalism For every future event x , x is inevitable.

B-fatalism For every agent x , every action ϕ , if x performs ϕ in the future, then x necessarily performs ϕ in the future.

C-fatalism It is a conceptual truth that: For every agent x , every action ϕ , if x performs ϕ in the future, then x necessarily performs ϕ in the future.

Van Inwagen rejects A-fatalism and addresses it at some length. B-fatalism states some 'fatalist' property of our actual world. Perhaps a B-fatalist is a determinist about our actual world. In another possible world, things are different. C-fatalism insists on the conceptual necessity of that fatalist property. At a minimum, there are no non-fatalist possible worlds. Van Inwagen examines C-fatalism. As he notes, C-fatalism entails B-fatalism. If, however, you reject C-fatalism, as van Inwagen ultimately does, then B-fatalism is still a live option. Indeed, van Inwagen's argument against C-fatalism can't be adapted as an argument against B-fatalism. This is plausible if, as suggested, we understand B-fatalism to be a version of determinism about the actual world.

THE FEELING OF INEVITABILITY. We are looking to explain why A-fatalism is wrong. Its central idea is inevitability. We saw that with Oedipus: for example, his killing of Laius was, we feel, inevitable. Intuitively, we want to say:

(10-1) Whatever Oedipus does at t , he kills Laius at $t' > t$.

Where does the feeling of the inevitable come from? Partly from the fact that the protagonists are ignorant of how things really are—whether about the plans of the Angel of Death, or of the Fate (which, according to the Greeks, is also determined by the Moirai). If only they knew the plan, they could have avoided their 'fate' (which, after all, would not qualify as 'fate' properly speaking). Partly it comes from a dramatic effect that the very actions the protagonist perform to avoid some event E (=their 'fate') are graphically shown to result in that very E : their choices are shown as 'fateful'.

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TWO INEVITABILITIES. Van Inwagen then distinguishes between two notions of inevitability:

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- (10-2) a. E is *strongly inevitable* for x at t iff for every ϕ , if x performs ϕ at t , E happens to x at $t' > t$.
- b. E is *weakly inevitable* for x at t iff
 - (i) E is not strongly inevitable for x at t ,
 - (ii) if x tries (at t) to avoid E , then x performs ϕ that causes E ,
 - (iii) x 's ignorance of how to avoid E (at $t' > t$) is strongly inevitable for x (at t).

According to these clauses, in (10-1) we have weak inevitability. But there are less dramatic examples, like exiting the burning building (see the text). Equally, it is easy to find cases of strong inevitability: the sun rising tomorrow is strongly inevitable for me. However, you might complain: what if I fly to the sun tonight and blow it up? In van Inwagen's terminology elsewhere, the sun rising tomorrow is not an untouchable event. So perhaps we have to modify the clause (10-2a) by restricting it to physically possible ϕ s.

So neither sense of inevitability is a mere fiction. Yet the real question is whether any stronger claim is plausible. Begin with weak inevitability:

- (10-3) a. $\exists E \exists x \exists t : I_w(E, x, t)$: plausibly true, as just discussed.
 b. $\forall x \exists E \exists t : I_w(E, x, t)$: ??
 c. $\forall x \exists E \forall t : I_w(E, x, t)$: ??

Van Inwagen briefly addresses (10-3b). Note here that we only ask whether there is some time t at which a particular event becomes weakly inevitable for a given entity. There is no conceptual absurdity in supposing that. But on the other hand, why do that? There is equally no positive reason in its favour. To defend it, we would have to assume some uniform major coincidence without any further empirical support.

Question 1. Examine the plausibility of (10-3c). Also exercise other combinations of quantifiers.

What of strong inevitability? It may be based on an old chestnut, that no matter what I do, only one future awaits me. Note that, e.g., Oedipus *could* have avoided killing of Laius. The trouble was that he could not, by his own powers anyway, choose the right course of action to avoid it. The attraction of strong inevitability, if there is any, may lie with 'one future'. This can be seen from the following inference:

- (i) Either you will eat breakfast, or you won't.
- (ii) If you will, then getting out of bed is superfluous.
- (iii) If you won't, then getting out of bed is no use either.
- (iv) Therefore, it's no use getting out of bed to get your breakfast.

Yes, only one future awaits me—namely, the disjunctive fact $\llbracket P \vee \sim P \rrbracket$. However, my concern is whether $\llbracket P \rrbracket$ or $\llbracket \sim P \rrbracket$ will obtain. In other words, nothing follows from this with regard to whether I will actually eat or will actually fail to eat. Once we see this, we also see that (ii) is false. In the event that I eat, one possible cause is my getting out of bed (or: in some possible worlds where I eat this is caused by getting out of bed). You will eat breakfast precisely because of getting out of bed.