Metaphysics // Fall 2023

Handout 14

Fatalism: van Inwagen II

Being and truth. We finally turn to C-fatalism (the ‘ real ’ fatalism). The fatalist says things like: 29

(i) If SB will in fact eat, he can’t fail to eat.
(ii) If Caesar did in fact go, he couldn’t have failed to go.

He’s saying all of this not because he knows some esoteric facts about SB or Caesar, such as their individual fates. He says this because of a perfectly general conceptual thesis that holds for every agent (see Handout 13):

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 notes that fatalism is fatal for the concepts of blame and responsibility. This is because these concepts are only applicable on the assumption that the agent could have acted otherwise. The fatalist rejects this assumption. He further claims that, precisely because fatalism is inconsistent with the concepts so basic to our life, we have to reject it. Yet he declines to pursue this line of argument here. 30

Remark 1. The idea that responsibility is logically independent of fatalism (=the inability of doing otherwise) is defended by Harry Frankfurt and later others in many Frankfurt-style scenarios. Roughly, the idea is that we attribute responsibility by looking at the motivational structure of the action, and not at its actual outcomes which may be as fixed as anything.

Remark 2. How could van Inwagen’s undiscussed argument go? Perhaps by entangling the fatalist in a metaphilosophical vicious circle. When the fatalist claims something, he implicitly takes responsibility for what he is saying.

The argument for fatalism. The kind of fatalism we are considering involves the notion of making/rendering a proposition false. We postpone, perhaps unwisely, any discussion of ‘ rendering false ’. Instead, we get on with the argument for fatalism. It goes like this: 34

(i) Take a proposition about the future.
(ii) Can it change its truth value?
(iii) Well, that would be too absurd.
(iv) So it is ‘ unchangeably true/false ’.
(v) But this means I can’t change its truth value.
(vi) Therefore, I can’t, at present, do anything to change the future.

Van Inwagen challenges (iv): when speaking of propositions, no good sense can be attributed to ‘ unchangeably true ’, nor to ‘ became true ’, ‘ remained true ’. 35

He immediately concedes that these predications *are* sometimes legitimate. The following conversation is intelligible:

(14-1) a. (You last year:) Gold is cheap.
b. (Me today:) What you said last year was true then (last year). But today it is no longer true.

So truth predication apparently changes in time. I might, therefore, conclude that the proposition ⟦Gold is cheap⟧ is only ‘ changeably ’ true.

But, van Inwagen insists, this conclusion would be wrong. He diagnoses (14-1) as talk about something else other than propositions. For example, ‘ what you said last year ’ in (14-1b) may refer to a past utterance. He also floats the suggestion that it may refer to a sentence. These items may indeed be changeably true. 36

However, this diagnosis clashes with what van Inwagen himself claimed earlier: truth is a property of propositions. Sentences and utterances, he also said, are not propositions. Thus, by his lights, the truth talk in (14-1b) is illegitimate or at best elliptical. 31

Van Inwagen supports his diagnosis with an analogy with a different case: 36

(14-2) a. (You:) The number of committee members is odd.
b. (I:) Well, the number of committee members *was* odd, but now it’s even.

Suppose that you believe that there are nine committee members. What you say is clearly not this triviality:

(14-3) Nine is odd.

Suppose I believe that there are ten committee members. Then what I say is not this absurdity:

(14-4) Ten was odd, but now it’s even.

What we both say is something along these lines:

(14-5) There is/was a certain odd/even number that characterises the set of committee members.

This situation illustrates an important issue in logic and philosophy of language (also metaphysics). But I don't see any analogy here with a conversation like (14-1). Van Inwagen seems to build it on the response like this 36
(an alternative to 14-1b):

(14-6) The proposition (that you affirmed) that gold is cheap was true, but is now false.

This kind of talk is plausible only because ' proposition ' often means ' statement ' which in turn is close to ' utterance '. Only a philosophical speaker would use ' proposition ' as something entirely distinct from ' utterance '. But for this speaker there is *ab initio* no reason to think of propositions as changeably true at all. On the lips of this speaker, (14-6) is a controversial philosophical claim. In any event, the difficulty in (14-2) turns on the proper interpretation of ' the number of Fs '. There is no such difficulty with interpreting ' the proposition that you affirmed ' in (14-6). The problem there lies with a *competing* view of truth value ascriptions.

Changing the past. Van Inwagen considers the possibility that we *can* make sense of ' unchangeably true '. 37
The suggested paraphrase runs thus:

[The proposition p is true at t] = [If someone asserted p at t, what he asserted would be true].

As it immediately turns out, we are looking at tenseless propositions. Van Inwagen says that the following are the same propositions:

a. Queen Vic will die in 1901. [asserted in 1878]
b. Queen Vic died in 1901. [asserted in 2023]

So tense drops out. We only have the following proposition which is true whenever it is asserted (assuming that QV indeed died in 1901):

(Proposition $\mathfrak{S}$) QV is dead in 1901.

And in explicating the ' unchangeable ' truth of $\mathfrak{S}$ we now have: 38

$\sim\Diamond\exists x\exists t\exists t'\neq t$: [If x asserts p at t, then $\mathfrak{S}$ is true] and [if x asserts p at t', then $\mathfrak{S}$ is false].

We can see where the fatalist is going. Let today be 1 January 1900. So $\mathfrak{S}$ was true yesterday (and last year, and any time in the past). Then I can't change its truth value: to do this, I have to reach into the past. This can't be done. But if I can't change its truth value, then I can't do anything about saving Queen Vic. Evidently it is the same with every tenseless proposition. For example:

(Proposition $\mathfrak{S}'$) SB shaves on 1 January 2024.

This proposition was true in 2022. I can't change its truth value. Therefore, it's not up to me whether to shave in 2024.

To appreciate van Inwagen's response, consider first this claim:

(14-7) It's not up to me to change any properties of Jupiter.

On the face of it, that's very plausible: who am I to change Jupiter? But on the second look, that's not so obvious. For suppose I tell you that Jupiter has the properties ' being heavy ', ' being hot ', ' being gaseous '. Of course, they are not within my reach. But, I add, it also has the property ' being n miles away from SB '. Well, this property I can change! So (14-7) is false, appearances notwithstanding. Call the change involved ' Cambridge change '.

Let's return to $\mathfrak{S}'$. The problem is, how can I change its truth value in the past—say, in 2021? But recall 42
the meaning given to ' true at t ':

(14-8) Had someone asserted $\mathfrak{S}'$ in 2021, he would have said something true.

Changing things in the past seems impossible. But changing truth values of the propositions asserted in the past is not to effect any ' real ' change of the things past. In choosing to shave I do not ' rearrange ' things in the past: I am only effecting a Cambridge change. So be it! This is no more outrageous than changing the properties of Jupiter whilst remaining on Earth (perhaps also in the future or in the past!). Hence no support for fatalism can be drawn from the alleged unchangeability of truth values.

Taylor's argument. The argument may be stated thus: 43f

(A) No agent can perform an act in the absence of its causally necessary condition.
(i) I deliberate whether to issue O or to refrain from issuing O.
(ii) Issuing O causes: the naval battle tomorrow. $[O \prec B]$
(iii) Refraining from O causes: the battle-absence tomorrow. $[{\sim}O \prec {\sim}B]$
(iv) Suppose there is no battle tomorrow. $[{\sim}B]$
(v) (ii), (iv) $\Rightarrow$ O lacks a necessary condition for its performance. [since O is a sufficient condition for the battle]
(vi) (A), (v) $\Rightarrow$ I can't perform O.
(vii) Suppose, on the other hand, there *is* a battle tomorrow. $[B]$
(viii) (iii), (vii) $\Rightarrow$ ${\sim}O$ lacks a necessary condition for its performance. [since ${\sim}O$ is a sufficient condition for the battle-absence tomorrow]
(ix) (A), (viii) $\Rightarrow$ I can't refrain from O (i.e. can't perform ${\sim}O$).
(x) (vi), (ix) $\Rightarrow$ it's not up to me (not in my power) whether to issue O.

Van Inwagen notes that even a weaker version of (A) leads directly to fatalism (see also footnote 20): 45

(A†) No agent can perform an act in the absence of its causally necessary condition.
(i) If I am ϕ-ing, then a logically necessary condition for ${\sim}\phi$-ing is absent.
(ii) Suppose I am ϕ-ing.
(iii) Then I *can't* be ${\sim}\phi$-ing.
(iv) If I am ${\sim}\phi$-ing, then a logically necessary condition for ϕ-ing is absent.
(v) Suppose I am ${\sim}\phi$-ing.
(vi) Then I *can't* be ϕ-ing.
(vii) (iii), (iv) $\Rightarrow$ either I can't be ${\sim}\phi$-ing or I can't be ϕ-ing.

The upshot is that whatever I am actually doing, I can't fail to do it: I couldn't have acted otherwise.

Remark 3. A possible way to put this conclusion: $(P \Rightarrow \Box P) \vee ({\sim}P \Rightarrow \Box{\sim}P)$. See also below.

To resist this reasoning, van Inwagen distinguishes between two readings of ability sentences: 45f

(14-9) a. I can (refrain from talking) at any time: $\forall t \exists w$(at the world w, at t, I don't talk).
b. I can (refrain from talking at any time): $\exists w \forall t$-in-w(at the world w, at t, I don't talk).

Let's examine (A) with the aid of this distinction. We have: 47

(A1) No agent can (perform an act) in the absence of its causally or logically necessary condition.
(A2) No agent can (perform an act in the absence of its causally or logically necessary condition).

We should try to defend either of these principles, intuitively—but without endorsing fatalism first! Let's look at (A2). We seem to have:

(14-10) (A2) $\Rightarrow$ I can't (perform O without a battle tomorrow).

Van Inwagen argues that, while (A2) is correct, it can't be used to defend fatalism. In order to defend fatalism, we need to endorse an inference pattern like this: 48f

(i) I can't (ϕ without C).
(ii) ${\sim}C$.
(iii) Therefore, I can't ϕ.

But, van Inwagen says, we can find inferences of this pattern that 'seem' invalid: 48

(i) I can't (move my finger without my finger moving).
(ii) My finger isn't moving.
(iii) Therefore, I can't move my finger.

The conclusion, van Inwagen says, 'certainly seems' false. But I read this as a blunt rejection of fatalism—I see no other reason. This ruins the whole dialectic: we are supposed to stay agnostic about fatalism in evaluating the logical merits of the argument in its favour!

Equally obscure is the verdict on the battle inference: 49

(i) I can't (perform O without a battle tomorrow).
(ii) There will be no battle tomorrow.
(iii) Therefore, I can't perform O.

Van Inwagen says that this is an invalid inference. The only convincing reason I can think of is that Taylor's inference pattern must in fact be read as follows:

(i) I can't (ϕ without C): $\sim\Diamond(P \,\&\, {\sim}Q) \equiv \Box(P \to Q)$.
(ii) $\sim C$: $\sim Q$.
(iii) Therefore, I can't ϕ: $\sim\Diamond P$.

This schema *is* invalid. But I am not sure whether this is what Taylor must be arguing.

Question 4. Explain why the schema is invalid.

That this is how van Inwagen thinks of Taylor's argument is confirmed by what he says about (A1). In this case 49
we must be able to endorse the following schema:

(i) I can't (ϕ) without C.
(ii) $\sim C$.
(iii) Therefore, I can't ϕ.

Van Inwagen says that this is a valid schema, but doesn't clarify. Here is one way to understand this:

(i) I can't (ϕ) without C: $\sim(\Diamond P \,\&\, {\sim}Q) \equiv \Diamond P \to Q$.
(ii) $\sim C$: $\sim Q$.
(iii) Therefore, I can't ϕ: $\sim\Diamond P$.

But though the inference be correct, should we grant (A1) so understood? Again, I am not sure I follow van Inwagen's reasoning. In any event, there is a quicker route if we accept the interpretation just mentioned: the argument involves a *petitio principii* fallacy. (A1) states that there is a condition for the *possibility* of action performance. But did we see any such condition in the naval battle story? No, the naval battle was a necessary condition for my *actual* performance O. To say, at the outset, that it was a condition for the possibility of performance is in fact to stack the deck in favour of fatalism: (A1) can on its own be read as a (coy) statement of fatalism.

The law of excluded middle. LEM was relied on in the refutation of Taylor's argument (see Remark 3).
Let's only address its relevance to fatalism. Van Inwagen addresses the question whether the following proposition 52
is either true or false:

(Proposition $\mathfrak{A}$) I will eat.

The question is not whether it is true or false—we don't know that. The question is whether a truth value is assigned (or assignable) to it, even if we don't know what it is. As van Inwagen notes, this is equivalent to the following (his numbering):

(3) Either I will eat or I won't.

He says that if I utter the *English sentence* 'Either I will eat or I won't', I utter something true. And if the 53
utterance is true, then the proposition $\mathfrak{A}$ is true. The dialectic of sentences and propositions is not altogether clear to me. Still, that much *is* clear: to utter that sentence in a way that warrants a truth-value assignment is to assert $\mathfrak{A}$. But there is a long tradition in logic and philosophy where precisely this is denied: $\mathfrak{A}$ is not assertible,
since there is no way of knowing either of the disjuncts. In this context, the response that van Inwagen—that 54
one asserts $\mathfrak{A}$, while denying that it has a truth value—is a non-starter (I think). Most, maybe even all, accounts of assertion won't go along with it.

Remark 5. The issue of LEM is explored at great length in Dummett's selection.

YSB