

# Logical fatalism and causal nihilism

Y. Sandy Berkovski

[forthcoming in *Philosophia*]

## Abstract

I argue, first, that logical fatalism entails an implausible commitment to causal nihilism. Not only is such a commitment grossly implausible, but it also leads to a *reductio* of the fatalist's argument. Then I compare my diagnosis with Merricks' refutation of fatalism based on an account of ontological dependence.

*Keywords:* fatalism, causation, truth, determinism, time.

## I

1. The argument for logical fatalism is meant to establish that we have no power of choice for any of our actions, as trivial as they may be, by showing how this fact follows just from some very broad conceptual and logical premisses.<sup>1</sup> Many versions have been proposed in the modern debate of the past sixty years. The version I want to look at has the following form:

*Fatalist argument (F-argument).* Assume that it is now 18:00. Let  $J$  be the proposition  $\llbracket \text{JONES EATS AT 18:01} \rrbracket$ . Then:

- F1. Jones has no choice at 18:00 about: the proposition  $J$  was true at 17:00.
- F2. Necessarily, if  $J$  was true at 17:00, then Jones eats at 18:01.
- F3. Therefore, Jones has no choice at 18:00 about eating at 18:01.

We can't do anything about the past, distant or near. That's the 'fixity of the past' in F1. By necessity, if a tenseless proposition of the form ' $\phi x$  at  $t$ ' has a truth value at a certain time, then it has the same truth value at any other time. That's the 'immutability principle' in F2, a logico-semantic necessity recognised by the fatalist (in this version of the argument). Finch and Warfield (1998:516) call it 'broad logical necessity'. It is not a law of logic, of course. Think of it as a conceptual truth, a staple of fatalistic arguments. Taylor (1962:57f) defends it with conceptual explications of necessary and sufficient conditions and the 'non-efficacy' of time. Taylor (1992:55) and Vihvelin (2008:307ff) base it on the principle of 'realism about the future' for the same purposes. This principle, however, like the related 'retro-closure principle' (Todd, 2021:174ff), is borne out of an overt metaphysical concern. Finally, F3 is not derived by any standard logical rule, but the argument nevertheless looks valid. Or so I will assume, for now.

A few more comments. The F-argument deviates in several ways from the classical Consequence Argument for incompatibilism (van Inwagen, 1983:94ff). We change the meaning of the operator  $N$  ( $Np = 'p$  and no one has, or ever had, any choice about whether  $p'$ ) in favour of a more perspicuous  $N_t^x$  relativised to a particular agent  $x$  and a particular time  $t$ . We similarly replace the assumption about the 'remote past' in premiss F1 with a weaker assumption about the past *simpliciter*. That the stronger assumption is not required even in the more complex

<sup>1</sup> Logical fatalism: Cahn (1967:8) defines it as the view that 'laws of logic alone' prove the absence of choice, Sobel (1998:3) says that the conclusion follows 'as a matter of pure logic broadly understood', Zagzebski (2024:6) says that it follows from the truths of the propositions about the future. These are somewhat misleading summaries, as I explain in a moment, though they help us distinguish between logical fatalism and, e.g., causal determinism. I say a little more about the definition of fatalism in §3.

derivation of incompatibilism is argued in Huemer (2000). And we replace the notorious transfer principle (1) with a less vulnerable (2), as recommended in Widerker (1987) and Finch and Warfield (1998):

- (1) Principle  $\beta$ :  $\{Np, N(p \supset q)\} \vdash Nq$
- (2) Principle  $\beta_N$ :  $\{Np, \Box(p \supset q)\} \vdash Nq$ .

In giving this form of the argument I follow Rea (2006) and Merricks (2009). Like them, I don't spell out further premisses required to make the argument deductively valid (though I'll come back to some of them below). A full version is in Finch (2017). A more recent formulation is in Zagzebski (2024:49) where the F-argument is put in terms of 'now-necessities', rather than choices:  $x$  is now-necessary iff  $x$  is fixed and beyond anyone's control. Given the potential problems with the fatalism/practical rationality link (§3), this may be a better way of presenting logical fatalism. Here, however, I will stick to the more familiar way.

2. I will now argue that logical fatalism entails causal nihilism, the idea that events have no causal factors and are best explained by fatalistic arguments. Let's begin by asking what kind of explanations the F-argument should yield for us. It is 18:00, and Jones is trying *not* to eat. Alas, he fails and eats at 18:01. Sometime later Jones reflects on his failure. The failure, as he understands it, was just that: choosing to eat, rather than choosing not to. Well, Jones asks, why *did* he choose to eat? Some would say, because he was hungry. Others would say, because his parents overfed him. Or because he was unduly impressed by commercial advertising. These are more or less detailed, more or less convincing explanations of Jones' choice. Should the fatalist have anything to contribute? On the face of it, he should. Jones' choice, so the fatalist, was not a genuine choice. Perhaps Jones said to himself:

I am thereby choosing to eat.

That would be just talk. The conclusion of the F-argument is that Jones 'had no choice'. The fatalist is expected to say that Jones didn't have a choice to eat because  $J$  was true already before 18:00. If he says just that, his explanation is enthymematic. A full fatalistic explanation should also mention that truth value does not, and cannot, change. In short, a pedantic fatalist would restate the F-argument.

The fatalist, everyone must agree, explains the absence of choice. As for Jones' choice to eat, rather than not eat, he offers no explanation. We don't have to (indeed, we can't!) explain a particular choice that wasn't there in the first place. Very well; but what *else* can the fatalist explain? He tells us a putatively interesting fact about Jones—namely, that Jones had no choice whether to eat or not. Has this fact itself no explanatory value? We might expect the fatalist to at least explain Jones' eating. Trivially, the fatalist has ruled out certain explanations of that event. For example, Jones ate not because he *chose* to eat. Had he eaten because he chose so, that would have entailed that Jones had a genuine choice over the truth value of  $J$ , which is what the fatalist denies.

The question is whether the fatalist has any positive proposal and can explain why Jones ate (rather than starved). Perhaps he is duly modest. We can explain the lack of choices to  $\phi$ , he says, but not  $\phi$ -ing itself. He elaborates:

*Qua* fatalists, we explain why Jones had no choice in eating. Something does explain why Jones ate, rather than starved, but we have nothing to say about what that is.

The fatalist's business is to defend a thesis about choices and freedom. That's what the F-argument was about. He has nothing to say about events that are not choices. He is, of course, sympathetic

to causal determinism. In more unguarded moments, he may even go as far as to claim that fatalism is causal determinism writ large.<sup>2</sup> Still, there is nothing in the F-argument to suggest that the fatalist should take a stance on the events that are not choices.

But that is false modesty. If, as the fatalist maintains, Jones' choice to eat does not explain Jones' eating, what does? Perhaps Jones' other choice, say, skipping his breakfast that day. This won't do. Since the F-argument holds generally, it should easily be paraphrased to dismiss any such choice in turn. Moreover, the same holds for any other agent. Just as Jones had no choice in eating, so for every other agent  $x$ , for every action  $y$ ,  $x$  had no choice in performing  $y$  that, by assumption, explains Jones' eating.<sup>3</sup>

If not human choices, then some natural causes would explain why Jones ate. The fatalist may here double down on his modesty. He may wish to continue talking of actions whose agents uniformly didn't have any choice to perform them. It's not clear whether we should grant the fatalist this way of talking, rather than insist on an analytic link between actions and choices (and 'agency' and 'performances'). Let the fatalist keep the familiar idiom, if only because it will make our discussion less cumbersome. Our modest fatalist may offer this explanation:

Jones ate at 18:01, because at 18:00 he found a cake.

An ordinary event has an ordinary cause used to provide an ordinary explanation. This isn't the most detailed or accurate explanation, but at some level, in some context, it is perfectly legitimate. And I take it that the modest fatalist intends to use 'because' causally. That's what his modesty is about: he doesn't mean to challenge the usual causal idiom involving ordinary events.

Now, however, there is a problem. The cake's proximity, the modest fatalist says, caused Jones to eat. Yet, on the other hand, by the fixity of the past it could not have any causal effect on any past fact (I'll elaborate on this point shortly). In particular, it couldn't change the past truth of  $J$ . With the assumptions as before, we can then mount the following argument, and this time let's spell it out in more detail:

*Causal-nihilist argument (CN-argument).*

- CN1. The presence of the cake at 18:00 can't have a causal effect on: the [Fixity]  
proposition  $J$  was true at 17:00.
- CN2. Necessarily, there is a time  $t$  such that  $J$  is true at  $t$  if and only if: [Immutability]  
for every  $t$ ,  $J$  is true at  $t$ .
- CN3. Necessarily, Jones eats at 18:01 if and only if there is a time  $t$  such [Truth at  $t$ ]  
that  $J$  is true at  $t$ .
- CN4. Necessarily, if  $J$  was true at 17:00, then Jones eats at 18:01. [CN2, CN3]
- CN5. Therefore, the presence of the cake at 18:00 can't have a causal [CN1, CN4]  
effect on Jones' eating at 18:01.

This argument, I submit, can't be dismissed out of hand. In particular, you can't happily accept the premisses CN1 and CN4 and then reject CN5 on the grounds that nothing in the premisses rules out a usual and ordinary effect a cake should have on Jones' eating. If, after embracing the premisses, you still reject CN5, that's because you help yourself to a very particular notion of causality, one that is, in fact, not suitable for fatalist metaphysics. I will come back to this issue in §3.

With no instant and knockdown refutation of the CN-argument, the question, as usual in this debate, is whether we should accept an inference of the form:

<sup>2</sup> Fatalism and determinism: Taylor (1992:55). I return to this claim in §3.

<sup>3</sup> Couldn't we say that Jones had a subjective experience of choice, even if that wasn't a *real* choice, and that this subjective experience explains his action? No, we couldn't, or at any rate shouldn't, as I argue in §3.

(3) Principle  $\beta_C$ :  $\{C_i^e p, \Box(p \supset q)\} \vdash C_i^e q$ ,

where the necessity operator ‘C’ now reads ‘can’t have a causal effect on’ relativised to events and times. This principle is used to move from CN1 and CN4 to CN5. Can we say anything to defend it?

In discussing  $\beta_N$  in (2), Finch (2017:201) claimed that no refutation of it is possible. For in order to refute it, you have to consider a situation where Jones has a choice over  $q$  (i.e. a state of affairs described by  $q$ ). But, according to the fatalist, that’s impossible: you can at most imagine a situation where Jones *appears* to have such a choice. Every refutation would thus be nipped in the bud. We might then try the same ploy with  $\beta_C$  in (3) and simply decline to justify it.

This reasoning is implausible, however.  $\beta_N$  is used to defend fatalism. So the fatalist can’t, on pain of circularity, appeal to his doctrine to defend the validity of  $\beta_N$ . Finch could have a point had we taken the situation of Jones’ choice to be impossible in the same way in which a violation of a logical law is impossible (and inconceivable). But Jones’ choice is not impossible in that way. After all, most people are not fatalists. They are not accused, not even by the fatalist, of being grotesquely irrational. Thus we have to allow Jones’ choice to be at least *prima facie* conceivable. That is all we must require in considering a refutation of  $\beta_N$ . In fact, if Finch is right, the fatalist should have a much swifter proof of his conclusion: just insist on the inconceivability and impossibility of choice, and you’re done.

By the same token, therefore, a defence of  $\beta_C$  is not out of question. Luckily for us though, our dialectical situation requires only a justification of  $\beta_C$  relative to  $\beta_N$ . We only need to show that a fatalist who accepts  $\beta_N$  to ensure the validity of the F-argument must also accept  $\beta_C$  (and the CN-argument).

Therefore, let’s look closer at the F-argument. If we grant its premiss F1, this, I suppose, is because it follows from a more general statement:

(4) Whatever Jones does at present, it can’t *change* any past fact  $p$  (or: a state of affairs described by the proposition  $p$ ).

That’s also how van Inwagen (1983:92) justified the original statement of the fixity of the past. But further, (4) should have nothing to do specifically with Jones or, indeed, with any other agent. The thesis of the fixity of the past, as I read it, is not a claim about the uniquely weak powers of conscious agents.<sup>4</sup> By a ‘universal generalisation’ style of reasoning, (4) itself follows from a still more general statement:

(5) Whatever *happens* in the present can’t change any past fact  $p$ .

And from (5), by a universal instantiation rule, we can derive the premiss CN1 of the CN-argument. On the other hand, since  $\beta_N$  and  $\beta_C$  have a shared major premiss of strict implication, we can now derive  $N_i^x q$ .<sup>5</sup> Suppose, for *reductio*, that  $\sim C_i^e q$ . With the assumptions as before, this means that the cake’s presence at 18:00 can have a causal effect on Jones’ eating at 18:01. So the cake’s presence at 18:00 may *change* whether Jones eats at 18:01. But again, by ‘UG-reasoning’ similar to the one that led us to (4) and (5), the cake’s presence may be replaced by any other present event, such as Jones’ choice to eat at 18:00. That is, Jones’ choice at 18:00 may change whether Jones eats at 18:01. Hence  $\sim N_i^x q$ , and we have a *reductio*. To sum up:<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> This point is argued at length in Zagzebski (2024:34ff) where the philosophical motivation behind the fixity of the past is identified as a claim about the arrow of time, the asymmetry between the past and the future.

<sup>5</sup> Thanks to an anonymous referee for pressing me on this point.

<sup>6</sup> Another way to use a *reductio* is to imitate the reasoning in Widerker (1987) and say that Jones eats at 18:01 just in case  $J$  was true at 17:00. Then, if the cake’s presence at 18:00 can change Jones’ eating at 18:01, it can also change  $J$ ’s truth value at 17:00, thus contradicting  $C_i^e p$ . This argument, however, will involve us in the debate over the distinction between causation and necessary conditions.

*From fatalism to causal nihilism.*

(i) $N_t^x p$	[Fatalist's premiss]
(ii) Proposition (5)	[ 'UG-rule ']
(iii) $C_t^e p$	[(ii), 'UI-rule ']
(iv) $\Box(p \supset q)$	[Shared premiss]
(v) $N_t^x q$	[(i), (iv), $\beta_N$ ]
(vi) $\sim C_t^e q$	[ <i>reductio</i> assumption]
(vii) $\sim N_t^x q$	[(vi), 'UG-rule ']
(viii) $C_t^e q$ .	[(v), (vi), (vii), <i>reductio</i> ]

The fatalist should, therefore, endorse the principle  $\beta_C$ , and the CN-argument stands at least by the fatalist's lights. Since, to repeat, we have chosen the presence of the cake as an arbitrary putatively causal factor of Jones eating at 18:01, the same argument goes through for any other such factor. But this means that no event, according to the fatalist, can have a causal effect on Jones' eating. If this much is true, the fatalist's modesty was a sham. He ruled out not only choices as explanations of Jones' eating, but also every causal explanation of it in general.<sup>7</sup>

Many of us would find this result disturbing on its own. Yet, the fatalist might retort, it is no more disturbing than the original F-argument: if we were prepared to dismiss free choices in favour of 'fatalism', then why can't we dismiss causal explanations as well? This, the fatalist says, is what the debate has always been about. If you think that a particular event (an action, say) can be explained causally, if you think that an event has causal factors 'deciding', so to speak, whether the event occurs or not, then you don't take seriously enough the *logical* facts the fatalist brings on board.

Confronted with the CN-argument, the fatalist sheds his modesty and confesses: he *is* a causal nihilist. And far from merely ruling out causal explanations, he can himself positively explain why Jones ate. Recall here that the F-argument relied on the following principle of semantic descent (spelled out as CN3 in the CN-argument):

(6) Necessarily, if  $J$  is true at a time  $t$ , then Jones eats at 18:01.

Then the fatalist offers the following argument:

*Deductive argument (D-argument).*

(i) The proposition $J$ was true at 17:00.	[Fixity]
(ii) Necessarily, if $J$ was true at 17:00, then Jones eats at 18:01.	[Semantic descent]
(iii) Therefore, Jones eats at 18:01.	[T axiom, MP]

The D-argument embodies the fatalist's preferred explanation of any individual event. Or rather, absent causal explanations and the very idea of a causal factor, it is the only explanation available to him.

## II

3. Suppose, now, that the analysis offered so far is cogent. On the face of it, the fatalist has met his Waterloo. He must hold that there are no causally efficacious events, and that events should

<sup>7</sup> Zagzebski (2024:70) says that 'nobody would argue' from fatalism to nihilism in the way just described. I agree that hardly any one would *like* to argue so, but that the fatalist *must* so argue, whether he endorses causal nihilism or not.

receive no causal explanation and should instead be explained by the immutability of truth and semantic descent. So he is refuted by the absurdity of his own commitments.

Yet the fatalist is unmoved. His first response, as we have just seen, is simply to bite the bullet. His second response, to the opponents unimpressed by the first one, is to challenge the arguments we have given. Where, he demands, is the problem? For starters, he says, we are proposing nothing new, only a variation of that old chestnut, the Idle Argument. If the CN-argument goes through, then Jones' eating has no causal factors. But this presumably means that, *whatever* happens at 18:00, Jones eats at 18:01. Hence, just like the Idle Argument concludes, Jones has no reason to reach for the cake or, indeed, choose to eat, either. And as with the Idle Argument, the response, as Chrysippus already saw, is that Jones' eating is fatalistically determined *together* with its plain causes like Jones' mental states, practical deliberation, or reaching for the cake. So it is not true that Jones eats 'no matter what', and that his eating has no causal factors. Or to use a somewhat more convenient example, suppose that it is fatalistically necessitated, by the immutable truth of the relevant proposition, that tomorrow Jones will shoot himself in the head and die. Well, wouldn't his death be caused by some plain factors, like loading the gun and firing the shot? It certainly would.<sup>8</sup>

Now the fatalist, I agree, does not have to claim that Jones would have died by shooting even if there were no gunshot (Taylor, 1992:61). The F-argument does not entail the claim that some or every world history with no gunshot at *t* still has Jones shot at *t*.<sup>9</sup> But this is not enough to reject causal nihilism. When *we* say that the gunshot caused death, we mean that it causally *determined* death. We mean, for example, that had the shot not been fired, Jones wouldn't have died. What the *fatalist* says, however, is that if the shot is indeed fired, then this is because the relevant proposition  $\llbracket \text{THE SHOT IS FIRED AT } t \rrbracket$  has always been true. And if Jones dies by a gunshot wound, that is because the proposition  $\llbracket \text{JONES DIES BY A GUNSHOT WOUND AT } t' \rrbracket$  has always been true. Again, if the shot is *not* fired, then this is because another proposition  $\llbracket \text{THE SHOT IS NOT FIRED AT } t \rrbracket$  has always been true, and if Jones survives, that is because  $\llbracket \text{JONES SURVIVES AT } t' \rrbracket$  has always been true. Analogously for other putative 'causes' like Jones' mental states or reaching for the cake. These putative causes are 'conjoined' with their effects, as Cicero put it. Yet, what we normally hold to be causally determined the fatalist holds to be determined by logico-semantic facts and systematically replaces causal explanations with D-arguments.<sup>10</sup> Our objection, then, is in line with the Chrysippean response to the Idle Argument.<sup>11</sup>

These remarks, I hasten to add, don't exhaust the complexity of the Idle Argument, as evidenced, e.g., by the discussions in Bledin (2020) and Sobel (1998). Thus, e.g., I have not addressed the question whether the Idle Argument should be stated with 'whatever happens at present' endorsed above or rather with 'if the putative causal factor is actually absent at present' (Sobel, 1998:31ff). My limited goal is only to point out that causal nihilism does not

<sup>8</sup> Chrysippean response to the Idle Argument: Bobzien (1998:226ff). Its modern presentation is in Dummett (1978:239–241) where it is treated as part of the *defence* of (a version of) fatalism.

<sup>9</sup> Compare the version of fatalism in Earman (1986:19): actions and events generally have effects, but there are 'higher' laws 'over and above the natural laws' that ensure the occurrence of 'fated' events like Oedipus' incest. Now, the kind of fatalism following from the F-argument recognises no distinction between special fated and regular non-fated events. However, the complaint I'm voicing in the text may be put in Earman's terms: all events are 'fated', since every event's occurrence is sufficiently explained by the F-argument. In this sense, the laws of fate encapsulated in the premisses of the F-argument are indeed placed over and above causal laws.

<sup>10</sup> This, I believe, is the intended reading of Taylor's 'Story of Osmo' (1992:58ff).

<sup>11</sup> Two earlier attempts to saddle some versions of fatalism with causal nihilism seem to have fallen into the trap of the Idle Argument: Bradley (1959:205), Wilson (1955:70). A related ambiguity is in a more recent formulation when Russell (2013:188–189) says that, according to fatalism, deliberations and decisions 'make no difference to the course of events', and 'what happens does not depend on how the agent deliberates.'

commit us at least to one version of the Idle Argument.

At any rate, the fatalist is not done. Our reading of the Idle Argument just given and the defence of the CN-argument argument as a whole, he protests, rest on spurious assumptions. First, the label of ‘nihilism’ is misleading.<sup>12</sup> In disputing the Idle Argument we all must agree that it is not pointless to choose to eat, to reach for the cake, to fire a gun. Deliberating whether to  $\phi$  is what ‘choosing to  $\phi$ ’ amounts to. So understood, ‘choosing to  $\phi$ ’ should be recognised as a cause of  $\phi$ -ing. That’s the real idea of the Chrysippean response. Yes,  $\phi$ -ing is not determined by the causes of this sort. But there is *another* notion of a cause that doesn’t involve necessity and counterfactual dependence. Think of transference accounts: we may very well say that the cake’s presence caused Jones’ eating if by that we mean, for example, that there is a flow of energy from the former to the latter.<sup>13</sup> Then the CN-argument is invalid. Its premiss CN1 is trivially true: there can be no flow of energy, or of any other physical quantity, to the *truth value* of  $J$ . But its conclusion CN5 is false.

Moreover, the fatalist continues, the locution ‘having no choice’ is ambiguous. Supposing that  $J$  is true, Jones can still deliberate at 18:00 whether to eat or not to eat, and he can make a choice following his deliberation. He can, that is, have a mental state we describe as ‘choosing to eat’. In order not to disturb the F-argument’s conclusion we move with care. Jones can’t choose *whether* to eat. But he may still choose *to* eat. In having this form of choice Jones may respond to reasons about dieting, say, as the normal mechanism of his practical reasoning is intact. He has, that is, what Fischer (2012:6ff) called ‘guidance control’ of his actions, and what Vihvelin (2013:169ff) called a ‘narrow ability’ both to eat and to starve. So characterised, Jones’ mental state and the associated deliberative process are part of the causal explanation why he in fact ate.

To begin with the earlier point, the fatalist’s appeal to non-deterministic causation, like transference accounts, is self-defeating. Let the premisses of the F-argument be granted. Is its conclusion true? Well, energy or some other conserved quantity is transmitted from Jones’ present state to his later state. Then there is a sense in which it *is* up to Jones now whether he eats a minute later. Jones’ present state is the physical source of his later state. If you say that Jones’ state (including his psychological attitudes) does not ‘determine’ what he does a minute later, then the same may be said in defence of the CN-argument. That is, if the transmission of energy from Jones’ earlier state (of deliberation, say) to his later eating doesn’t count as making the act of eating ‘up to Jones’, then, as in our other example, the transmission of energy from the gun to Jones’ later death-state doesn’t count as causing that state, either. Loosely put, it is not ‘up to the gun’ to cause Jones’ death, and the F-argument and the CN-argument stand and fall together.<sup>14</sup>

Now to the question of choices: In the first place, there is a conceptual issue whether the fatalist is entitled to deliberate about anything at all. Jones the fatalist is deliberating whether to eat, say, but he also believes that the outcome, his choice and action, is not up to him. Since we deliberate only about things we believe are in our power, Jones’ attitudes are inconsistent. This is a problem, if it is one, that the fatalist shares with causal determinists. Perhaps, however, the short answer is that in his practical reasoning Jones must suspend his belief in fatalism and work under an ‘illusion’ of freedom. In any event, a possible clash between theoretical commitments and practical rationality is something we’ve been aware of since Descartes and Hume.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Thanks to István Aranyosi and David Kovacs for pointing out this nuance.

<sup>13</sup> Transference accounts: Dowe (2000:41–122). I follow Paul and Hall (2013:24) in grouping several different views under ‘transference’.

<sup>14</sup> Another worry: transference accounts in particular don’t fit well the fatalist’s metaphysics. They are motivated by a methodological assumption that ‘scientific theories are the best guide to the structure of reality’ (Dowe, 2000:11). Imagine the surprise of the transference theorists so motivated at being told that people have no choice because of the past truth value of a certain proposition.

<sup>15</sup> Determinism and deliberation: Denyer (1981:63ff). Illusion and freedom: Smilansky (2000).

A more urgent problem is that, again, the distinction between two kinds of choice undermines the fatalist's own dialectic. What, after all, *is* fatalism? Call 'generic determinism' the idea that every logically contingent state of affairs necessarily and non-trivially follows from other states of affairs. Causal determinism is a species of generic determinism so defined: according to it, causal laws and initial conditions entail every happening in the world. Call 'past-truth determinism' another species of generic determinism: you are a past-truth determinist if you believe that appropriately constructed past truths logically entail present states of affairs. That's premiss F2 of the F-argument. A past-truth determinist may, indeed, endorse compatibilism (or at least, try to), just like a causal determinist might. Absent further assumptions, neither of these views is committed to any claim about choice and freedom.

By contrast, the doctrine of logical fatalism, as we understood it here, is encapsulated in the F-argument whose conclusion is F3—namely, the claim of the lack of choice. So the logical fatalist can't turn around and begin tinkering with the concept of choice. For if he does, why doesn't he similarly endorse a modification of F3:

F3\*. Jones has no choice at 18:00 whether to eat at 18:01 (=it is not up to Jones whether he eats)?

This, he could now say, is consistent with:

F3†. Jones has a choice at 18:00 to eat at 18:01 (=it is up to Jones to eat),

which is unpacked as:

Jones can deliberate and eventually decide at 18:00 about eating at 18:01 (though his decision does not determine his eating).

A past-truth determinist, as we said, could live both with F3\* and F3†. The fatalist, however, having accepted F3† would take the sting out of his own argument. His whole goal was to shock us with the absence of choice. If we have now found a way of saying that we *do* have a choice, what good was the F-argument to begin with?

**4.** The fatalist still won't yield. We didn't uncover any logical inconsistency in his reasoning, he says, nor did we seek to do that. It is not as though the fatalist, having rejected causation, is now unable to explain anything at all. Causal factors are unreal. But they are replaced by *logical* factors. You see this in the D-argument. It has the same form as the respectable D-N model of scientific explanation, only instead of laws of nature we have the principle of semantic descent, and instead of the observed initial conditions there is a statement about a past truth value of *J*. Since neither of these claims is incoherent, there is no absurdity in the fatalist's reasoning.

The rejoinder is that we have, in fact, uncovered a logical flaw in the F-argument. Why do we, the fatalist included, accept the fixity of the past to begin with, though not the fixity of the future (as a premiss, *ab initio*)? Not because of some piece of conceptual analysis of 'choice'.<sup>16</sup> Nor presumably can we simply declare it a brute fact requiring no further justification. In the first place, this would be too dogmatic given the persistent scenarios of time travel (more on this in a moment). Secondly, shouldn't the future's status, its fixity or non-fixity, be another brute fact by parity of reasoning? Well, no-one, not even the fatalist, would think so: the fatalist wants this to be a conclusion of his argument. Suppose, then, the future's *non*-fixity is a brute fact. The fatalist aims to reject that. So by his lights, the success of his argument should also cast doubt on its premiss. What we initially thought to be a brute fact, i.e. the fixity of the future, turned out

---

<sup>16</sup> Conceptual analysis: Grey (1999:57).



not to be so. Then why should we continue to hold the fixity of the past a brute fact, indeed, a fact at all?

A more credible answer is that Jones has no choice because the past is beyond his causal *reach*. Take causation out or grant backward causation, and there is no reason why the fixity of the past should be our premiss. As Linda Zagzebski put it, the fixity premiss rests on ‘the idea that the past is causally closed’: ‘There is a wall of causation separating causal forces from the past’ (2024:64, 76, italics added). We shouldn’t, that is, rush to accuse of *insanity* someone who denies the past’s fixity: there were too many ‘insane’ fiction writers and filmmakers for that. But when these authors purport to deny it, and to affirm a free choice to change the past to boot, they attempt to describe to us a causal order leading from the present to the past. On this view, causal nihilism clashes with the fixity of the past. In fact, it produces a *reductio* of the F-argument. First, we portray F1 as entailed by a general claim of the past’s fixity existentially committed to causal relations. Using the CN-argument we then negate the existence of any such relations.<sup>17</sup>

The fatalist is unimpressed: changes of the past are *metaphysically* impossible, he says. For consider time travel. Presentists deny that it is possible, because, according to them, there is just nowhere to travel to.<sup>18</sup> What exists is what exists now. Changes of the past are impossible for the same reason that time travel is impossible. But, the fatalist continues, let’s not rest our case on presentism. Let’s follow the current consensus and assume that time travel *is* possible.<sup>19</sup> Even then we have no reason to dispute the fixity of the past.

What, after all, can the time traveller do about past events? Not much. At least since Lewis (1986) a common distinction has been between ‘changing’ the past and ‘influencing’ or ‘affecting’ it.<sup>20</sup> The former is widely recognised as impossible, the latter is just as widely recognised as possible. Jones, for example, can time travel to 1066 and witness the Battle of Hastings, but only provided he already was there, at Hastings, in 1066. Thus he is said to ‘influence’ the past by simply getting there from the present. But he can’t intervene and save Harold Godwinson. He can’t ‘change’ past events and ‘overwrite’ history. Saving Harold is not compossible with the actual history as we know it. Jones’ presence, however, is. Time travel to the past is a somewhat uneventful affair: you will be doing what you have already done. However, it is possible. Hence, the fatalist concludes, how we think about causation is not essential to our acceptance of the fixity of the past. The past is still fixed, you see, even under backward causation—that is, it is immune to ‘changes’.<sup>21</sup>

The fatalist’s reasoning is unconvincing. For as soon as the change/influence distinction is drawn in this way, the fixity of the past no longer serves his purposes. The fatalist insists that we can’t do anything about the past. *Do?* any thing? Jones can influence the past by time travelling to 1066. Unless he in fact did play a meaningful role in the Norman conquest, his influence will come down to quietly observing the battle, and not much beyond that. Then can’t he influence the past far less spectacularly by eating or not eating, choosing or not choosing to eat? Just as placing himself at Hastings is up to Jones, so is determining the truth value of *J*. After all, its past truth and falsehood are both compossible with our history, just like Jones’ presence and absence at Hastings are.

Furthermore, what is the general motivation for insisting on the change/influence distinction in the first place? The distinction serves to allow influencing the past, while ruling out changing

---

<sup>17</sup> I take it that a similar *reductio*, arrived at by a somewhat different route, is also the conclusion in Zagzebski (2024:77–78).

<sup>18</sup> Nowhere to travel to: Wasserman (2018:39).

<sup>19</sup> Current consensus: Vihvelin (2013:44).

<sup>20</sup> Changing and influencing: Horwich (1987:116), Lewis (1986:76), Baron (2015:130).

<sup>21</sup> To prevent a misunderstanding: the fatalist doesn’t merely invoke Lewis’ authority, but rather follows the consensus in the current debate and sketches the reasons to accept it.

it. The past can't be changed, though not because of a purely logical flaw in allowing any such change. Instead, changing the past yields causal inconsistencies.<sup>22</sup> The clearest example is the 'self-defeating' acts of which the grandfather paradox is the most famous one.<sup>23</sup> If I can travel from 2025 back to 1925 to kill my grandfather, how to understand the causal history of my travel? My travel should causally be traced to my birth. But if my grandfather died by my hand long before then, how could I even start? My grandfather's survival is a necessary element in the causal chain leading up to my time travel. Of course, you can postulate miracles like resurrections or creations *ex nihilo*. But at least in our world, these miracles are incompatible with the laws of nature as we know them. People are not resurrected from the dead, adulthood is caused by childhood.<sup>24</sup> And even if you wish to argue for large miracles in a remote world, then you have to invoke causal explanations, too. In other words, the fixity of the past is still rooted in our views on causality.

The fatalist might attempt one final shot. If Jones *was*, in fact, at Hastings in 1066 having travelled there from 2025, then in the year 2025 he *must* go back to 1066. In 2025 it is not up to Jones, therefore, to travel back to 1066.<sup>25</sup> The possibility of time travel that we now consider seems to tell in favour of fatalism. But this response confuses *logical* fatalism with causal determinism. Even if it is not up to Jones to travel back to 1066, this is not because of a past truth value of some proposition. It is rather because of the causal links between Jones' travel to 1066 and his present condition where a choice is to be made. Time travel may pose genuine challenges to freedom, but they are not of the sort that should benefit the fatalist.

Here, then, is the logical flaw we have isolated in the fatalist's reasoning. Fatalism entails causal nihilism. But causal nihilism undermines the fatalist's key premiss. Without an appeal to causation, and perhaps to different kinds of backward causation involved in time travel, we are not compelled to accept the fixity of the past. At best it will be a conclusion in a further argument heavily relying on causal reasoning that the fatalist does not, in fact, have. Thus without causation the fatalist's F-argument does not take off. Hence, not only is causal nihilism counter-intuitive, both in itself and as a mere inference from fatalism, but, as mentioned earlier, it also leads to a *reductio* of the fatalist's own argument.

### III

5. The fatalist, I've been saying, has committed himself to the unreality of causation. Fatalism is inconsistent with both deterministic causation and non-deterministic causation like transference. The only remaining alternative is causal nihilism. Causal explanations are idle: they simply track fatalistic truths. If the fatalist continues to use the causal idiom, he must see it as, at best, an occasionally convenient paraphrase of the fatalistic idiom embodied in the D-argument. The latter reflects what 'really' goes on in the world. But, we are apt to protest, it is really the other way round. Hence another way to think about my complaint is by saying that the fatalist misrepresents the truth-causation dependence.

Now this conclusion may appear to echo the one in Merricks (2009) where we have a different interpretation of the F-argument. Implicit in the fatalist's reasoning, Merricks argues, is an erroneous view of the truth-being dependence. Truth 'depends' on being, but the fatalist assumes the opposite.<sup>26</sup> I will finish, therefore, by pointing out what I consider to be the defects

<sup>22</sup> Causal inconsistencies: Vihvelin (1996:315).

<sup>23</sup> Self-defeating acts: Wasserman (2018:71ff), also Horwich (1987:117ff).

<sup>24</sup> Miracles: Vihvelin (1996:329).

<sup>25</sup> See Tognazzini (2017) for this line of argument.

<sup>26</sup> The basic idea is already in McCall (1994:15-16) where the fatalist is accused of ignoring the *supervenience* of

of Merricks' diagnosis and contrast it with the view defended above.

The F-argument, says Merricks, contains a *petitio principii* fallacy. Why was the proposition *J* true at 17:00? Since truth depends on being, not *vice versa*, the truth value of a proposition is explained by a certain fact—namely, the fact that the proposition represents.<sup>27</sup> In our case, the truth value of *J* depends on Jones eating at 18:01. The notion of the dependence in question is left open, but at the very least it should be explanatory: truth values are ascribed to propositions *because* of the facts represented by those propositions.

Merricks then formulates a 'corollary' of this claim: an agent having no choice over *p*'s truth presupposes that the agent has no choice over anything on which *p*'s truth depends—in particular, he has no choice over the fact represented by *p*. We are apt to accept the premiss F1 of F-argument only because we have *already* accepted its conclusion F3, implicitly so. Unless the conclusion is granted, there is no compulsion to accept the premiss. This counts as a *petitio*, since the most plausible reading of this fallacy is epistemic. The justification you have for the conclusion is necessary for any justification you may have for the problematic premiss.<sup>28</sup>

This diagnosis is problematic, however. For suppose we accept the following:

(7) [The proposition *J* is true at 17:00] depends on [Jones eating at 18:01].

Well, is the truth of *J* at 17:00 a characteristic of the past? Is it a fact about the past, namely, about what was the case some time ago? I think it is. Or so the fatalist assumes, and Merricks apparently concurs. Let us say that it is a characteristic of a 17:00-segment in the history of the world. Analogously, the fact of Jones eating at 18:01 is a characteristic of the future. It is a characteristic of the 18:01-segment. But if it is, and if (7) also holds, then, we ought to conclude, the past depends on the future. Less ambiguously, we say that an earlier segment depends on the later segment. But how can this be generally, and how can we reconcile this with the presumed fixity of the past?

As already mentioned in §2, the fixity of the past is not a claim about the powers of conscious agents. It is a claim that no matter what happens now, it can't effect a change in the past. A way around this incapacity is to isolate a family of 'second-rate' past facts that *can* be changed by the occurrences in the present, and trivially so. We see just such a manoeuvre in Ockhamism with its distinction between hard and soft facts. There is nothing extraordinary in being able to change the soft facts about the past. Just as Jones can change some relational properties of Jupiter by walking on Earth, so can he change the past truth value of the proposition *J* and thereby effect a change of the past.

The truth-being dependence thesis, then, entails, in the first instance, the dependence of some past facts over certain future facts and a conflict with the fixity of the past thesis. More accurately, of course, the entailment requires the additional assumption, granted by Merricks, about the *past* truth of *J*, along with the general assumption about propositions being true at a particular time. At any rate, to repeat, to resist this paradoxical conclusion we appeal to an Ockhamist-style revision of the fixity of the past thesis to the effect that the premiss F1 of the F-argument no longer holds. But if that is how Merricks' objection runs, it becomes a version of the Ockhamist response. Both Merricks and an Ockhamist need a distinction between first-rate and second-rate facts about the past, to the effect that the fixity of the past, when properly understood, should only refer to the former, but the premiss F1 of the F-argument should instead refer to the latter and should, therefore, be rejected.

---

being on truth. McCall, however, seems to attribute to the fatalist a particularly weak argument along the lines of the 'Parody argument' in Merricks (2009:35f). See also Sanford (1989:177) for a still earlier expression of the same idea in a related context.

<sup>27</sup> Representing: Merricks (2009:34).

<sup>28</sup> Analysis of *petitio*: Sgaravatti (2013).

Of course, the alignment with Ockhamism goes against Merricks' own emphatic protestations. While he cites four reasons why his view is not Ockhamist, the main one, I think, is just that it does not rely on the hard/soft distinction of facts (and propositions) (2009:48). As is well-known, such a distinction is elusive. One version of it goes thus: the past truth of *J* may be said to be not strictly a fact 'about' the past, but at least partly about the future, with the obvious consequence that the denial of Jones' power to change it can't be a premiss.<sup>29</sup>

This doesn't work, however. Say that a proposition is strictly about the past if it does not entail any proposition that is either in a future tense or contains a future date. But consider the proposition:

Aristotle was born in 384 BC.<sup>30</sup>

It looks like a genuine proposition about the past and nothing at all like the problematic *J*. But it entails a proposition ostensibly about the future:

Aristotle is not born in 2125.

Hence, oddly, the fact of Aristotle's birth in 384 BC must be designated as a soft fact about the past. Indeed, every proposition mentioning a past date should entail *some* proposition about the future.

Other explications have recently been offered, but none is without problems. The distinction in terms of temporal relationality proposed in Fischer and Todd (2011:102) is criticised in Merricks (2011:576, 579).<sup>31</sup> A rather complex distinction in terms of determination is suggested in Todd (2013:839).<sup>32</sup> By Todd's own admission, however, it relies on a number of unexplained categories.

It seems to me at least promising to try to make the hard/soft distinction analogous to the one between real change and Cambridge change. It is, I submit, a natural way to think about it (as I have done a moment ago with the Jupiter example). Thus Alvin Plantinga, having expressed doubts about the 'aboutness' explication of the distinction, claims that to say that a certain proposition was true in the past is to say 'nothing about the past except in a Pickwickian, Cantabridgian soft of way' (1986:247). Plantinga's own way with the hard/soft distinction is to say, roughly, that for every proposition expressing a hard fact about the past, there is no agent (not even God) who can *cause* it to be false (258). The distinction is made sense of by an appeal to causation. Unsurprisingly, this corresponds to what in my view is the best treatment of Cambridge change in Shoemaker (1980). Cambridge change involves a change in Cambridge properties. Now, to ascribe a certain non-Cambridge, real *F* to a thing *x* is to ascribe to *x* a certain disposition, a causal 'potentiality' (114). To know that *x* is *F* is to observe an *F*-like causal influence that *x* has on other objects (116). In all of this *F* is contrasted with a Cambridge property *G*. To know that *x* is *G* is not to observe its *G*-like behaviour (121f). In some cases it is to observe a certain behaviour of *y* ≠ *x*. In other cases, it is to observe *x*'s own behaviour, but at a time other than the time of observation. Shoemaker intends the latter provision to deal with grue predicates, but it may just as well apply to Ockhamist soft facts.

Here is the upshot. The cogency of Merricks' objection from truth-being dependence requires, in the first place, some Ockhamist distinction between first-rate and second-rate facts about the past. But a good (or the best) way to defend that distinction is to invoke causal relations. Hence it is imperative for Merricks to be able to refute causal nihilism. Unless this is done, his objection

<sup>29</sup> See Horwich (1987:30) for a crisp summary.

<sup>30</sup> Here I follow Plantinga (1986:251–252). A review of the 'about the time *t*' explications: Zagzebski (1991:70–76). Unsurprisingly, some of the troubles with 'about *t*' mirror the ones with 'about' generally: Yablo (2014:23ff).

<sup>31</sup> See also Zagzebski (2024:54) for a related discussion.

<sup>32</sup> Its simpler version is described already in Zagzebski (1991:71).

would beg the question against fatalism. In this sense, the success of Merricks' objection depends on the success of our argument.

6. To sum up the main points of this paper, in section I I claimed that the F-argument commits the fatalist to causal nihilism. Causal relations, that we normally consider as relevant for what we can do, the fatalist must count as irrelevant. We normally think of events as determined by their causes. It now turns out, implausibly, that putative 'causes' determine nothing. The fatalist's ploy is undermined further (section II) when we observe that the key premiss of the fixity of the past is plausible only so far as we do take causal facts as relevant. The fatalist's argument, already hardly credible, is also logically unsound. In section III I argued that Trenton Merricks' dependence diagnosis involves an Ockhamist distinction between hard and soft facts. But the best way to make sense of this distinction is by invoking causal relations. Hence Merricks' critique of fatalism, for it not to involve itself a *petitio*, must include a refutation of causal nihilism.

### Declarations

The authors have no conflict of interest and no funding was received for this study.

### References

- Baron, S. (2015). Back to the unchanging past. *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly*, 98(1):129–147.
- Bledin, J. (2020). Fatalism and the logic of unconditionals. *Noûs*, 54(1):126–161.
- Bobzien, S. (1998). *Determinism and Freedom in Stoic Philosophy*. Oxford University Press, New York.
- Bradley, R. D. (1959). Must the future be what it is going to be? *Mind*, 68(270):193–208.
- Cahn, S. M. (1967). *Fate, Logic, and Time*. Yale University Press, New Haven, CT.
- Denyer, N. (1981). *Time, Action & Necessity*. Duckworth, London.
- Dowe, P. (2000). *Physical Causation*. Cambridge University Press, New York.
- Dummett, M. A. E. (1978). Bringing about the past. In *Truth and Other Enigmas*. Duckworth, London.
- Earman, J. (1986). *A Primer on Determinism*. D. Reidel, Dordrecht.
- Finch, A. (2017). Logical fatalism. In Timpe et al. (2017).
- Finch, A. and Warfield, T. A. (1998). The *Mind* argument and libertarianism. *Mind*, 107(427):515–528.
- Fischer, J. M. (2012). *Deep Control*. Oxford University Press, New York.
- Fischer, J. M. and Todd, P. (2011). The truth about freedom. *Philosophical Review*, 120(1):97–115.
- Grey, W. (1999). Troubles with time travel. *Philosophy*, 74(1):55–70.
- Horwich, P. (1987). *Asymmetries in Time*. MIT Press, Cambridge, MA.

- Huemer, M. (2000). Van Inwagen's Consequence Argument. *Philosophical Review*, 109(4):525–544.
- van Inwagen, P. (1983). *An Essay on Free Will*. Clarendon Press, New York.
- Lewis, D. K. (1986). The paradoxes of time travel. In *Philosophical Papers*, volume 2. Oxford University Press, New York.
- McCall, S. (1994). *A Model of the Universe*. Clarendon Press, New York.
- Merricks, T. (2009). Truth and freedom. *Philosophical Review*, 118(1):29–57.
- Merricks, T. (2011). Foreknowledge and freedom. *Philosophical Review*, 120(4):567–586.
- Paul, L. A. and Hall, N. (2013). *Causation*. Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Plantinga, A. C. (1986). On Ockham's way out. *Faith and Philosophy*, 3(3):235–269.
- Rea, M. C. (2006). Presentism and fatalism. *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 84(4):511–524.
- Russell, P. (2013). Compatibilist-fatalism. In *The Limits of Free Will*. Oxford University Press, New York.
- Sanford, D. H. (1989). *If P, then Q*. Routledge, London.
- Sgaravatti, D. (2013). Petitio principii: A bad form of reasoning. *Mind*, 122(487):749–779.
- Shoemaker, S. (1980). Causality and properties. In van Inwagen, P., editor, *Time and Cause*. Springer, Dordrecht.
- Smilansky, S. (2000). *Free Will and Illusion*. Oxford University Press, New York.
- Sobel, J. H. (1998). *Puzzles for the Will*. University of Toronto Press, Toronto.
- Taylor, R. (1962). Fatalism. *Philosophical Review*, 71(1):56–66.
- Taylor, R. (1992). *Metaphysics*. Prentice Hall, Englewood Cliffs, NJ, fourth edition.
- Timpe, K., Griffith, M., and Levy, N., editors (2017). *The Routledge Companion to Free Will*. Routledge, New York.
- Todd, P. (2013). Soft facts and ontological dependence. *Philosophical Studies*, 164(3):829–844.
- Todd, P. (2021). *The Open Future*. Oxford University Press, New York.
- Tognazzini, N. A. (2017). Free will and time travel. In Timpe et al. (2017).
- Vihvelin, K. (1996). What time travelers cannot do. *Philosophical Studies*, 81(2–3):315–330.
- Vihvelin, K. (2008). Compatibilism, incompatibilism, and impossibilism. In Sider, T., Hawthorne, J. P., and Zimmerman, D. W., editors, *Contemporary Debates in Metaphysics*. Blackwell, Oxford.
- Vihvelin, K. (2013). *Causes, Laws, and Free Will*. Oxford University Press, New York.
- Wasserman, R. (2018). *Paradoxes of Time Travel*. Oxford University Press, New York.

- Widerker, D. (1987). On an argument for incompatibilism. *Analysis*, 47(1):37–41.
- Wilson, H. V. R. (1955). Causal discontinuity in fatalism and indeterminism. *Journal of Philosophy*, 52(3):70–72.
- Yablo, S. (2014). *Aboutness*. Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ.
- Zagzebski, L. T. (1991). *The Dilemma of Freedom and Foreknowledge*. Oxford University Press, New York.
- Zagzebski, L. T. (2024). *Fatalism and the Logic of Time*. Oxford University Press, New York.