Naming and Free Will

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Abstract

Rigidity does interesting philosophical work, with important consequences felt throughout metaphysics, epistemology, philosophy of mind, and so on. Our aim in this paper is to show that rigidity has yet another role to play, with surprising consequences for the problem of free will and determinism, for the phenomenon of rigidity has the upshot that some metaphysically necessary truths are up to us. The significance of this claim is shown in the context of influential arguments against free will. We show that some virtually indisputable inference rules employed in formulations of the Consequence Argument, as well as in fatalistic arguments, fail with a variety of counter-examples. Along the way, we compare the present arguments to other, similar arguments made in recent years.

Keywords: choice; the Consequence Argument; determinism; fatalism.

Say Socrates is a man with a choice between telling the truth or lying.

He thinks out loud:

> "If I choose to tell the truth, I will render the proposition that I
> tell the truth true. If I choose to lie, I will render the proposition
> that I lie true. Where p is the proposition that I tell the truth, I
> will use 'Plato' as the name of p's actual truth value, which is 1
> if p is true, and 0 otherwise. If I choose to tell the truth, I will
> render p, and therefore the proposition expressed by 'Plato is 1',
> true. I shall always be honest. I shall tell the truth!"

Socrates goes on to tell the truth, and therefore the non-contingent
proposition expressed by the identity sentence 'Plato is 1' is true. In fact,
necessarily true. Why, exactly, is the proposition expressed by 'Plato is 1' a
necessary truth? Since 'Plato' is a proper name, whatever it designates in
the actual world it does so rigidly. '1' is also a proper name, and so it too
designates its actual referent rigidly. According to our example, 'Plato' and
'1' turn out to be distinct names for the same truth-value.[1] Therefore, the
identity sentence 'Plato is 1' expresses a true proposition; in fact, a necessarily
true proposition, since with respect to every possible world, 'Plato' and '1'
will designate the very same object they actually designate. This is, more
or less, one of the arguments for the necessity of identity originating from
Kripke (1980).

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[1]The argument can also be constructed, perhaps less objectionably so, without the
assumption that there are truth-values, by simply letting 'Plato' and '1' stand for the
number 1. The argument was inspired by Leslie Tharp's arguments for his "theorems in
metaphysics". See Tharp (1989), especially page 208.

What is interesting in this case is that, despite being a necessary truth, there seems to be a sense in which the truth of the proposition expressed by 'Plato is 1' was up to Socrates. The truth of this proposition is, in some way, a consequence of his actions, since its being true depends on the fact that Socrates tells the truth. Moreover, Socrates could have refrained from telling the truth, and by telling a lie his actions would have had resulted in the proposition expressed by 'Plato is 1' being false – in fact, necessarily false, by an analogous Kripkean argument. Therefore, Socrates seems to have had a choice about a necessary truth.

Why would Socrates's having a choice about a necessary truth be important? Here is one reason. Peter van Inwagen's notorious modal formulation of the Consequence Argument[2] against the compatibility of determinism and human free will makes use of a deductive rule, to wit:

(α) $\Box p \vdash \mathrm{N}p$,

where $\Box$ is the necessity operator from modal logic and N a *no-choice-about* operator that when applied to p says of it that it is true and no one has, or ever had, a choice about it. If, however, the above scenario is one according to which Socrates really has a choice about a necessary truth, then that is in effect a counter-example to (α). Likewise, since necessary truths are strictly implied by anything, it is a counter-example to the rule according to which no-choice-about is closed under strict implication, or

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[2]We shall not formulate the argument here, but the reader can find it in van Inwagen (1983: 93-95).

$(\beta 2)$ $\mathrm{N}p, \Box(p \supset q) \vdash \mathrm{N}q$.

This rule was first proposed by Widerker (1987) as a substitute to the controversial rule

(β) $\mathrm{N}p, \mathrm{N}(p \supset q) \vdash \mathrm{N}q$

which was present in van Inwagen's original formulation of the Consequence Argument, and which many philosophers now take to be refuted by some well-known arguments of McKay and Johnson (1996).[3]

For van Inwagen (1983), one has a choice about a true proposition if and only if one is also able to render it false – and free will exists only if someone has a choice about a true proposition. This notion of being able to render a true proposition false can and has been understood in multiple ways, but it essentially involves a counterfactual construction with either *would* or *might*.[4] To put it negatively, in the way in which it appears in the Consequence Argument, the former says, roughly, that no one is able to render a true proposition p false iff there is nothing that anyone can ever do that would falsify p, and the latter says, roughly, that no one is able to render a true proposition p false iff no matter what anyone does, p would still be true. The case at hand appears to be a counter-example to both readings, as there is no counterfactual world that would falsify a necessary truth, and

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[3]Still, Merlussi (2022) argues that McKay and Johnson's well-known counterexample does not work if the conditional excluded middle principle for counterfactuals is true.

[4]See, for instance, Huemer (2000) for different interpretations of the notion of 'able to render false'.

every necessary truth is true no matter what. Simply put, if some necessary truths are up to us, the Consequence Argument is invalid.

Another reason why it is important to note that some necessary truths may be up to us involves arguments for logical and theological fatalism. Here we understand *logical fatalism* as the thesis that, necessarily, no one could have done otherwise than what one does; and we understand *theological fatalism* as the thesis that, necessarily, no one could have done otherwise than what an omniscient God knew, and thus infallibly believed, one would do.

One typical way of arguing for logical fatalism is by using the rule we have been calling here $(\beta 2)$. Trenton Merricks (2009), for example, who rejects the main argument for logical fatalism, presents what he believes to be the strongest version of this argument as follows:

> (1) Jones has no choice about: that Jones sits at t was true a thousand years ago.

> (2) Necessarily, if that Jones sits at t was true a thousand years ago, then Jones sits at time t.

> (3) Jones has no choice about: Jones's sitting at time t.

This argument involves, roughly, merely an application of $(\beta 2)$, or something very close to it. It is notable that Merricks himself says nothing in favor of $(\beta 2)$, which has indeed been taken as an obvious rule by many philosophers.[5]

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[5]Merricks (2009: 38) does point out, on a footnote, that the argument's form resembles that of $(\beta 2)$ – or an application of it.

If, however, (β2) is invalid, then the above argument for logical fatalism is likewise invalid. Someone might have no choice about a truth that nevertheless strictly implies a truth one does have a choice about. Socrates has no choice about the truth that the universe is expanding, though that truth strictly implies that Plato is 1, a truth that Socrates does have a choice about – or so it seems.

Furthermore, a typical way of arguing for theological fatalism is also by way of (β2). In fact, in the very same article Merricks presents an argument for theological fatalism which resembles the argument above for logical fatalism:

> (1) Jones has no choice about: God believed that Jones sits at t a thousand years ago.

> (2) Necessarily, if God believed that Jones sits at t a thousand years ago, then Jones sits at time t.

> (3) Jones has no choice about: Jones's sitting at time t.

This argument, too, involves something very close to, if not exactly, (β2). If this rule is invalid, then this argument for theological fatalism is also invalid.[6] If some necessities are up to us, then some of the best arguments for logical and theological fatalism are invalid. If some necessities are up to us, some

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[6]Similar arguments for logical and theological fatalism are presented in the introduction of Fischer and Todd (2015). At the end of the day, we agree with Merricks that both arguments fail, though we are presenting different reasons for believing this to be so.

of the best arguments for fatalism, and against the compatibility of free will and determinism, are disarmed.

OBJECTIONS AND RESPONSES

Of course, even though there is something to be said for the claim that ours is an example of someone having a choice about a necessary truth, this is undeniably controversial. How could one ever have a choice about whether a necessary truth is true? How could a necessary truth, which is true no matter what, ever be up to someone, indeed, anyone? The example deserves further investigation.

First of all, it is fair to ask whether there is any way of making sense, precisely, of what it is to have a choice about a necessary truth. If choosing involves having different options, how can one have a choice about whether p if p is a necessary truth? That is, if p is true at every possible world, how could one have a choice about whether p? It seems there are no options available other than worlds whereat p is true, and so no options at all with respect to p. Indeed, the example involving Socrates seems to disconnect, as it were, the actions performed by Socrates and the propositions which are true or false as a result of his actions. For the proposition that Plato is 1 is non-contingent, that is, it is either necessarily true or necessarily false, but the action performed by Socrates, which is that of telling the truth, is itself contingent. So even though that Plato is 1 *could not fail* to be true (or false), Socrates could have failed to tell the truth (or a lie). And the proposition

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that could not fail to be true obtains its truth-value as a result of the action which Socrates could have failed to perform. How can this be?

We think there is a simple way of making sense of this, though we will only sketch this account here since we already give much more details elsewhere.[7] Consider, for example, the case of Socrates. The denotation of '1' is fixed based on how things are at the actual world, and the same is true for the denotation of 'Plato'. Given the way things actually are, 'Plato is 1' expresses a necessary truth. But the actual world itself could have been different. And if the reference of 'Plato' had been fixed in a different way, say, as the name of p's truth value at another world *taken as actual*, such as a world in which Socrates tells a lie, then 'Plato is 1' would have expressed a necessary falsehood relative to that world taken as actual. This is why we can say, coherently, that Plato is 1 is a necessary truth though it would have been necessarily false had things gone otherwise. The claim that Socrates had a choice about the necessary truth in question can therefore be made sense by understanding such claims with *counteractual* conditionals. A counteractual conditional ■→ is different from the counterfactual conditional with the usual Lewisian semantics (and its variants) involving a similarity relation between

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[7]See Lampert and Merlussi (2021a, 2021b). To say that there is a simple way of making sense of the case at hand is not to say that the case itself is simple or obvious. Not at all. Moreover, the account we provide is only one way of making sense of the claim that some necessities are up to us. Presumably, there are different accounts that can be profitably developed using notions of metaphysical explanation or ground. One reason to think this involves the inherent hyperintensionality of the claim that some necessities are up to us, since all necessities are modally equivalent, though some are obviously not up to us. If choices or abilities are to be hyperintensional, then one might do well in explaining such notions directly with non-modal tools.

possible worlds.[8]   The difference is that the former makes use of double-indexing:

> $p \blacksquare\!\!\rightarrow q$ is true at a possible world w relative to a world v taken as actual if and only if at the most similar possible worlds z to w at which p is true relative to z taken as actual, q is true at z relative to z taken as actual.[9]

In the counteractual sense, we need not deny that having a choice about a truth requires the ability to "render it false". We need not deny that having a choice requires having (genuine) options. Counteractually, one can make sense of choices involving necessities by claiming that one has a choice about a necessary truth because, among other things, if one were to refrain from doing something, that necessary truth would be false relative to a different world taken as actual. Given how the actual world is, no necessary truth could be false. But relative to different worlds taken as actual, some necessities are false, and so one could have done or refrained from doing something such that a necessary truth would (counteractually) be false. To use the terminology of Davies and Humberstone (1980) – and, near enough, Evans (1979) – we can say that some necessities which are only *superficially* so, that is, true at every possible world, but false at some worlds taken as actual, are up to us.

So there is a precise way of understanding the case at hand. But this does not settle the issue. Having a formal way of understanding a notion

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[8] See Lewis (1973).

[9] See Lampert and Merlussi (2021a, 2021b).

or concept is hardly enough to make it plausible. And even if one thinks having a choice about a necessary truth is not in itself absurd or incoherent, one might find the example involving Socrates suspicious in another regard. One might be tempted to say, for instance, that even though it *does* involve something which Socrates had a choice about, this is *not* the truth of the proposition expressed by 'Plato is 1'. Rather, the objection goes, Socrates had a choice about whether 'Plato' would designate the truth-value which '1' also designates. And so Socrates had a choice about the metalinguistic and contingent fact that 'Plato' and '1' co-refer. We agree with the latter point. But we also think that the scenario suggests something stronger, i.e. that the non-contingent proposition expressed by 'Plato is 1' is true because Socrates decided to tell the truth, and therefore the truth of that proposition depended on what Socrates chose to do. The possibility that one can make these kind of choices should not be excluded a priori and, in particular, it should not be excluded on the grounds under scrutiny, namely, for the reason that no one has choices about necessary truths. There is nothing about Socrates's powers, mental states, abilities and the like that would explain why he has a choice about whether p but not about whether the proposition expressed by 'Plato is 1' is true. Perhaps, then, one consequence of some cases of the necessary a posteriori – Plato is 1 is, after all, an a posteriori necessity – is that some necessities depend on certain features of the world, features which can be discovered only empirically. Whether Plato is 1, for example, depends on what Socrates does, on whether he tells the truth. That proposition is

true *because* he told the truth. To us, there seems to be no good explanation of what makes that non-contingent proposition true which does not involve an action performed by Socrates, namely, that of telling the truth.

One could still demur by claiming numerical identity between the propositions expressed by 'Plato is 1' and 'Plato is Plato', or also by '1 is 1'. And since no one has ever had a choice about the last, the same would follow concerning the first. There are indeed well-known views about the nature of propositions that would support the claim that those are all identical. One such view claims that propositions are *sets of possible worlds*, i.e. the set of possible worlds whereat they are true. According to this view, there is just one necessary proposition, i.e. the set of all possible worlds, wherefore no distinction would be drawn concerning the propositions expressed by 'Plato is 1' and, say, '1 is 1'. Another is the *Russellian* view, according to which propositions are structured by the extensions of the subsentential expressions of the sentences expressing them. And by adopting the view according to which proper names are directly referential, since 'Plato' and '1' are distinct proper names for the same truth-value, therefore naming the same object, the propositions expressed by 'Plato is 1' and '1 is 1' are one and the same. However, there are also views which will distinguish the propositions in question. By and large, according to a *Fregean* view the sentences 'Plato is 1' and '1 is 1' express different propositions (or thoughts) because they are associated with different cognitive values. While '1 is 1' expresses a proposition that is trivial and a priori, the same is not true in general of the

proposition expressed by 'Plato is 1'. We are sympathetic to some such view that is able to distinguish the propositions in question, the details of which can be filled in multiple ways, though it is certainly beyond the scope of this article to do so. Still, one could take the present examples to motivate a rejection of the claim that 'Plato is 1' and '1 is 1' express one and the same proposition. If one thinks those should be distinguished on epistemic grounds, as the latter is trivial and a priori whereas the former is informative and a posteriori, one might think those should be distinguished on the grounds suggested above: while the truth of 1 is 1 obtains independently of human action, the truth of Plato is 1 was up to Socrates, and therefore these are different truths.

Nevertheless, we can construct similar and perhaps more convincing cases in favor of the claim that some necessities are up to us that do not trade on identity. Suppose Xanthippe is a woman with a choice between telling the truth or lying. Like Socrates, she thinks out loud:

> "If I tell the truth, I will render the proposition that I tell the truth true. If I lie, I will render the proposition that I lie true. Let 'ACT' be a name for the set of all and only truths about my actions, and let p be the proposition that I tell the truth. If I choose to tell the truth, I will render p, and therefore $p \in \text{ACT}$, true. But I shall always be honest. I shall tell the truth!"

Then again, Xanthippe goes on to say the truth, therefore rendering p, as well as $p \in \text{ACT}$, true. After all, if she tells the truth, p will be true, and so

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a member of ACT. But $p \in$ ACT is not merely true; it is, in fact, necessarily true, under the reasonable assumption that set membership is rigid: x is a member of a only if, necessarily, x is a member of a. It is, in a way, essential to a set that it has the members it has. Consequently, $p \in$ ACT is true only if it is necessarily true.

The plausibility of our main claim – once more, that some necessities are up to us – does not rest entirely on those two cases. An analogous argument can be formulated once more by the *plurality* of truths about Xanthippe's actions, since x is one of the aas only if, necessarily, x is one of the aas. And if the aas are all the truths about her actions, it is up to Xanthippe whether p is one of the aas if it is up to her whether p.

Moreover, comparable cases can and have been formulated with the 'actually' operator and rigid definite descriptions, originally by Stephen Kearns (2011), and more recently defended by Lampert and Merlussi (2021a, 2021b) – though, to be sure, Kearns is focused only on the claim that people can sometimes be morally responsible for some necessary truths. One main outcome of the present paper is, therefore, that in order to argue for the claim that some necessities are up to us it is not required to use the machinery of modal logic with the 'actually' operator and rigid definite descriptions. Other widespread (though, of course, resistible) assumptions lead to the same conclusion.

Rigidity does interesting philosophical work, with important consequences felt throughout metaphysics, epistemology, philosophy of

mind and so on (e.g., the necessity of identity, the necessary a posteriori, the contingent a priori, argument against the identity theory of mind, etc.). It also seems to imply we have a choice about some metaphysically necessary truths, that is, that some necessities are up us. This is no mere curiosity, as its consequences for the free will debate are far from trivial. There seems to be a logic governing the notion of choice about a true proposition, but the inference from the necessity of a proposition to there being no choice about it may just as well not be part of it.

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