On a Theological Argument for Fatalism

Author(s): Susan Haack

Source: *The Philosophical Quarterly (1950-)*, Apr., 1974, Vol. 24, No. 95 (Apr., 1974), pp. 156-159

Published by: Oxford University Press on behalf of the Scots Philosophical Association and the University of St. Andrews

Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/2217720

ON A THEOLOGICAL ARGUMENT FOR FATALISM

By Susan Haack

There is an argument, an argument with a long though somewhat chequered history, which apparently shows that fatalism follows from divine omniscience. This argument has long troubled those who wish to maintain, on the one hand, that there is an omniscient God, and, on the other, that man has free will.

It is the aim of this paper to show that this *theological* argument is no more than a needlessly (and confusingly) elaborated version of the argument for fatalism discussed by Aristotle in *de Interpretatione* 9, which, since its sole premiss is the Principle of Bivalence, may conveniently be called the *logical* argument for fatalism. If this is right, if the theological premisses of the theological argument can be shown to be strictly irrelevant to the fatalist conclusion, then it follows that it is pointless to try to avoid fatalism by modification of those theological premisses. It will thus prove possible to dismiss, *en bloc*, a whole range of counter-arguments to the theological argument for fatalism.

The theological argument has been put like this :

> It seems . . . too much of a paradox and a contradiction that God should know all things, and yet there should be free will. For if God foresees everything, and can in no wise be deceived, that which providence foresees to be about to happen must necessarily come to pass. Wherefore, if from eternity He foreknows not only what men will do, but also their designs and purposes, there can be no freedom of the will, seeing that nothing can be done, nor can any sort of purpose be entertained, save such as a Divine providence, incapable of being deceived, has perceived beforehand (Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, trans. James, H. R., p. 234).

or, in a more modern version :

> Last Saturday afternoon, Jones mowed his lawn. Assuming that God exists and is (essentially) omniscient . . . it follows that (let us say) eighty years prior to last Saturday afternoon God knew (and thus believed) that Jones would mow his lawn at that time. But from this it follows, I think, that at the time of action . . . Jones was not *able*—that is, it was not *within Jones's power*—to refrain from mowing his lawn. . . . If God exists and is (essentially) omniscient . . . no human action is voluntary (Pike, N., " Divine Omniscience and Voluntary Action ", *Philosophical Review*, 74 (1965), p. 31).

The argument can be more perspicuously set out as follows :

(1) God is omniscient.

(2) For all p, if ' p ' is true [false] then God knows that p [that $\sim$ p].
$$\text{(from (1) by definition of ' omniscient ')}$$

(3) For all p, if God knows that p [that $\sim$ p], then ' p ' is true [false].
$$\text{(by the principle that if x knows that p, ' p ' is true)}$$

(4) If God knew at t_1 that an event e would [would not] occur at t_2 (t_1 earlier than t_2), then it was true [false] at t_1 that e would occur at t_2.
$$\text{(instance of (3))}$$

(5) If it was true [false] at t_1 that e would occur at t_2, then at t_1 it was not within the power of any person to prevent [bring about] e's occurrence at t_2.

(6) So, if God knew at t_1 that e would [would not] occur at t_2, then at t_1 it was not within the power of any person to prevent [bring about] e's occurrence at t_2.   (from (4) and (5))

(7) But it is either true or false at t_1 that e will occur at t_2.

(8) So, either God knows at t_1 that e will occur at t_2, or God knows at t_1 that e will not occur at t_2.   (from (2) and (7))

(9) So at t_1 either it is not within the power of any person to prevent e's occurrence at t_2, or it is not within the power of any person to bring about e's occurrence at t_2.   (from (6) and (8))

We can now establish our thesis—that the theological argument is merely an elaboration of the logical argument—by showing

    (i) that premiss (7)—the Principle of Bivalence—is essential to the above argument ;

    (ii) that this premiss is independent of the theological premiss (1) ;

and (iii) that the theological premiss (1) is inessential.

(i) *The logical premiss is essential.* Given only that God is omniscient— that he knows everything that is true—and that if he knows that e will [not] occur, no-one can prevent it [bring it about], then no fatalist conclusion follows. If it was neither true nor false that e will occur, then God, although omniscient, would know neither that it will nor that it will not occur, and it would remain possible that human agency should prevent it or bring it about.

(ii) *The logical premiss is independent of the theological premiss.* The principle of bivalence does not follow from divine omniscience (nor, of course, *vice versa*). William of Ockham, indeed, thought that there was a problem about allowing both that some future tense sentences are neither true nor false, and that God is omniscient ; for if some sentences are neither true nor false, there are some questions to which God does not know the answer. But to suppose that this is inconsistent with God's omniscience is surely a mistake. To say that God is omniscient is to say that he knows everything that can be known. Only truths can be known ; so the fact that God fails to know propositions which are neither true nor false is no threat to his omniscience.

(iii) *The theological premiss is inessential.* This becomes apparent when we notice how premiss (1) is used. The argument moves from the assumption that ' p ' is true [false], *via* the theological premiss, that God is omniscient, to the thesis that God knows that p [that $\sim$ p], (line 8), and *via* the epistemological premiss, that if God knows that p [that $\sim$ p], ' p ' is true [false], to the thesis that ' p ' is either true or false.

This enables us to see how the theological (and the epistemological) premisses (1) and (3) function as an entirely gratuitous detour. The logical argument for fatalism proceeds from the premiss that it is true or false, in advance of the outcome, that an event will occur, directly to the conclusion that the event can either not be prevented or not be brought about. The theological argument proceeds from the premiss that it is either true or false that e will occur to the conclusion that God knows either that it will or that it won't occur ; then from the premiss that God knows either that

it will or that it won't occur to the conclusion that it is either true or false ; and from there to the conclusion that e can either not be prevented or not be brought about. The theological argument proceeds from the same premiss to the same conclusion as the logical argument : but indirectly, since it moves from the premiss that it is true or false in advance of the outcome that a certain event will occur, to the conclusion that God knows either that it will or that it won't, and from there back again to the Principle of Bivalence, from which, finally, the fatalist conclusion is drawn just as it is in the logical argument.

This is not to say that no variant on the theological argument we have considered is possible that *would* amount to more than an elaborate version of the logical argument. One such possible variant would go as follows : if God knows that e will occur, it must be on the grounds that initial conditions C and laws $L_1 \ldots L_n$ obtain, from which the occurrence of e follows. But if such conditions and laws obtain, then e is already determined, and so not preventable. And similarly, if God knows that e will not occur. A difficulty with this version of the argument is that it requires the problematic assumption that God makes inferences. But the authors we have considered above do not appeal to the *grounds* God might have for his belief that e will occur, but only to the *truth* of his belief. And it is this version of the theological argument which I claim to be only an elaborate version of the logical.

Reactions to the theological argument have been very various. Some of them are quite obviously unsatisfactory. Augustine and Molina try to avoid the fatalist conclusion by pointing out that God does not cause the actions he foreknows. This, however, is clearly beside the point (as Jonathan Edwards pointed out) since nowhere in the argument is it claimed that God *does* cause the actions he foreknows. But other reactions seem, on the face of it, more promising. Many writers anxious to avoid the fatalist conclusion have found fault with the theological premisses. Boethius, Anselm, Aquinas and Maimonides, for instance, all suggested that ' knows ' cannot apply in the same sense to God as it does to man, and so blocked the argument by claiming, in effect, that only by equivocation can one apply premiss (3) (which concerns *human* knowledge) to premiss (1) (which concerns *divine* knowledge). Now clearly this claim is relevant to the argument, in that it denies something which is taken for granted in the argument ; and furthermore there are independent grounds for making it—for instance, that God is sometimes said to be " outside " time, so that it might be inappropriate to attribute temporally specific predicates, including ' knows at t_1 that e will occur at t_2 ', to him. Nevertheless, if our thesis, that the theological argument is only an elaboration of the logical argument, is right, this kind of reaction is certainly mistaken. *For it blocks only the detour and not the direct route to fatalism.* Just the same objection, incidentally, applies to the suggestion (which Pike entertains) that we might avoid fatalism by denying the epistemological premiss (3), and allowing that ' x knows p ' may not entail ' ' p ' is true '. This reaction too (apart from any doubts that there might be about its independent merits !) would leave the direct route to the fatalist conclusion wide open. And any claim to find greater force in the theological than in the logical argument (as by Lucas in *The Freedom of the Will*, § 14) can also be dismissed. The theological argument may—on account of its greater complexity—seem more *plausible* than the logical argument ; but it cannot be more *sound*.

I suggest, then, that whatever reaction is appropriate to the logical argument for fatalism is also appropriate to the theological argument. For

this reason, those writers—such as Prior (in " The Formalities of Omni-science ", in *Papers on Time and Tense*) and Cahn (in ch. 5 of *Fate, Logic and Time*)—who offer one and the same " solution " to both arguments are at least on the right lines. Cahn, in fact, seems aware that the logical premis-ses are essential to the theological argument, though not fully aware of the importance of this fact.

What the appropriate reaction is to the logical—and so, if I am right, also to the theological—argument for fatalism, is another question.

University of Warwick