

Handout 5

Fatalism: van Inwagen

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

THE FEELING OF INEVITABILITY. We are looking to explain why A-fatalism is wrong. Its central idea is inevitability. Consider Oedipus: his killing of Laius was, we feel, inevitable. So:

- (5-1) Whatever Oedipus does at t , he kills Laius at $t' > t$.

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

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

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- (5-2) a. E is *strongly inevitable* for x at t iff for every ϕ , if x performs ϕ at t , E happens to x at $t' > t$.
- b. E is *weakly inevitable* for x at t iff
 - (i) E is not strongly inevitable for x at t ,
 - (ii) if x tries (at t) to avoid E , then x performs ϕ that causes E ,
 - (iii) x 's ignorance of how to avoid E (at $t' > t$) is strongly inevitable for x (at t).

According to these clauses, in (5-1) we have weak inevitability. But there are less dramatic examples, like exiting the burning building (see the text). Equally, it is easy to find cases of strong inevitability: the sun rising tomorrow is strongly inevitable for me. However, you might complain: what if I fly to the sun tonight and blow it up? In van Inwagen's terminology elsewhere, the sun rising tomorrow is not an untouchable event. So perhaps we have to modify the clause (5-2a) by restricting it to physically possible ϕ s. 26

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

- (5-3) a. $\exists E \exists x \exists t : I_w(E, x, t)$: plausibly true, as just discussed.
 b. $\forall x \exists E \exists t : I_w(E, x, t)$: ??
 c. $\forall x \exists E \forall t : I_w(E, x, t)$: ??

Van Inwagen briefly addresses (5-3b). Note here that we only ask whether there is some time t at which a particular event becomes weakly inevitable for a given entity. There is no conceptual absurdity in supposing that. But on the other hand, why do that? There is equally no positive reason in its favour. To defend it, we would have to assume some uniform major coincidence without any further empirical support. 27

Question 1. Examine the plausibility of (5-3c). Also exercise other combinations of quantifiers.

What of strong inevitability? It may be based on an old chestnut, that no matter what I do, only one future awaits me. Note that, e.g., Oedipus *could* have avoided killing of Laius. The trouble was that he could not, by his own powers anyway, choose the right course of action to avoid it. The attraction of strong inevitability, if there is any, may lie with 'one future'. This can be seen from the following inference: 28

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

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

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:

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 2. 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 3. 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:

- (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’.

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

- (5-4) 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 $\llbracket \text{GOLD IS CHEAP} \rrbracket$ is only ‘changeably’ true.

But, van Inwagen insists, this conclusion would be wrong. He diagnoses (5-4) as talk about something else other than propositions. For example, ‘what you said last year’ in (5-4b) 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.

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 (5-4b) is illegitimate or at best elliptical.

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

- (5-5) 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:

- (5-6) Nine is odd.

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

- (5-7) Ten was odd, but now it’s even.

What we both say is something along these lines:

- (5-8) 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 (5-4). Van Inwagen seems to build it on the response like this (an alternative to 5-4b):

- (5-9) 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, (5-4) is a controversial philosophical claim. In any event, the difficulty in (5-5) turns on the proper interpretation of ‘the number of *F*s’. There is no such difficulty with interpreting ‘the proposition that you affirmed’ in (5-4). 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’. The suggested paraphrase runs thus: 37

[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 2025]

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 **Q**) QV is dead in 1901.

And in explicating the ‘unchangeable’ truth of **Q** we now have: 38

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

We can see where the fatalist is going. Let today be 1 January 1900. So **Q** 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 **S**) SB shaves on 1 January 2026.

S was true in 2024. I can’t change its truth value. Therefore, it’s not up to me whether to shave in 2026.

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

(5-10) 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 (5-10) is false, appearances notwithstanding. Call the change involved ‘Cambridge change’.

Let’s return to **S**. The problem is, how can I change its truth value in the past—say, in 2021? But recall the meaning given to ‘true at t ’: 42

(5-11) Had someone asserted **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.

YSB