

TEMPORAL NECESSITY AND LOGICAL FATALISM

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ABSTRACT I begin by briefly mentioning two different logical fatalistic argument types: one from temporal necessity, and one from antecedent truth value. It is commonly thought that the latter of these involves a simple modal fallacy and is easily refuted, and that the former poses the real threat to an open future. I question the conventional wisdom regarding these argument types, and present an analysis of temporal necessity that suggests the anti-fatalist might be better off shifting her argumentative strategy. Specifically, two points of interest emerge from my analysis: first, temporal necessity turns out to be an inappropriate and ineffective tool for the fatalist to make use of; and, second, the dismissal of the argument from antecedent truth value turns out to be an over-hasty one.

Consider the following argument: first, assume that it is presently t_2 , and that the past tense proposition, ‘At t_1 it was the case that at t_3 Susan will go to Anstruther’, is true. Since this proposition is about the past, and since the past is necessary (given that it is impossible for any true proposition about the past to be false henceforth), the proposition is necessary as well. But the proposition also entails the truth of the future tense proposition, ‘Susan will go to Anstruther at t_3 ’, in which case the latter proposition is *also* necessary. Therefore, it is now necessary that Susan will go to Anstruther in the future, and thus she is not free to do as she wishes.

The preceding type of argument—call it the argument from temporal necessity (or Type I)—is often thought to pose a real threat to the non-fixity of the future. At least, it is meant to give us more cause for concern than the other most common logical fatalistic argument type—the one from antecedent truth value (or Type II). Whereas Type I has it that past truth about the future fixes the future; Type II has it that *present* truth about the future fixes the future. So, according to the standard interpretation of Type II, the logical fatalist infers the necessity (at, say, t_2) of ‘Susan will go to Anstruther at t_3 ’, merely from the trivial necessity of the following conditional: ‘If it is true, now, to say that Susan will go to Anstruther at t_3 , then Susan will, indeed, go

to Anstruther at t_3 '. But it is a notorious modal fallacy to infer $\Box p$ from $\Box(p \supset p)$, as this interpretation implies the fatalist has done. The Type I logical fatalist, however, infers $\Box p$ from $\Box(\Box q \supset p)$, where q is a past tense proposition which entails the future tense proposition p . It is the concept of temporal necessity that allows the logical fatalist to make this valid modal inference. Not surprisingly, then, among contemporary anti-fatalistic philosophers the Type II argument is generally ignored, and the Type I argument is deemed to pose the real threat.¹ It is the goal of this essay to question the conventional wisdom regarding these argument types, and to present an analysis of temporal necessity that suggests the anti-fatalist might be better off shifting her argumentative strategy.

I take Zagzebski's conclusions about temporal necessity as the starting point of my own analysis of the concept. Zagzebski (1991) argues that the intuitive grounding of temporal necessity does not support the fatalist's application of the concept in the Type I argument. Temporal necessity is meant to reflect the ontological asymmetry between past and future, and is meant to pick out entities that are real, fixed, and actual (as opposed to unreal, non-fixed, and potential). Given this, it must be constitutive of the concept that only events (or states of affairs) can properly be said to admit of it. Propositions, unless given a very counter-intuitive ontological status, are not real/unreal, fixed/non-fixed, or actual/potential—at least not in the way that is intended when discussing the common-sense asymmetry between past and future.² If this is right, then past tense propositions, such as 'At t_1 it was the case that at t_3 Susan will go to Anstruther', are not temporally necessary, and therefore neither is the entailed future tense proposition. Furthermore, Zagzebski argues, propositions like the one above in the Type I argument do not refer to events or states of affairs of the sort that

1. For example, Craig (1988: 135–6), Plantinga (1986: 237), Sorabji (1980: 91), and Zagzebski (1991: 12), specifically reject Type II as being less plausible than Type I; and Craig (1986), Freddoso (1983), and Plantinga (1986) expend considerable and not entirely successful efforts in refuting Type I.

2. Of course, there are philosophers who claim that propositions admit of these distinctions. But Zagzebski's analysis is meant to capture the pre-philosophical intuitions from which the concept of temporal necessity originates. And, according to these intuitions, it is only concrete events or states of affairs that admit of the relevant distinctions.

motivate our intuitions about the necessity of the past. The state of affairs that corresponds to this proposition is *its being the case at t_1 that Susan will go to Anstruther at t_3* . But, in what sense can *its being the case at t_1 that Susan will go to Anstruther at t_3* be said to be an ontologically real, fixed, and temporally actualised state of affairs? *Its being the case that Susan will go to Anstruther at t_3* does not occur or become actual at t_1 , and so this is not the type of state of affairs to which any intuitively consistent notion of temporal necessity applies.

Although I agree with Zagzebski as far as her conclusions go, I think more can be said about temporal necessity. I want to take a closer look at the concept, using the distinction between necessity *de dicto* and necessity *de re* as a medium for analysis. There are two ideas I would like my discussion to motivate: the first is that the logical fatalist is not a likely candidate to have ever relied upon temporal necessity in arguing for his doctrine. In connection with this idea, I should note that I am unaware of any sincere fatalist who does make use of the concept—it is most often used by anti-fatalists to argue *against* determinate truth (or falsity) about the future. And the second is that its modal oddities make it an inappropriate and dubious tool for use in constructing a fatalistic argument (regardless of whether one sincerely embraces the doctrine or not).

We begin with a brief review of the *de dicto/de re* distinction. Necessity *de dicto* is the necessity of a proposition—the type of necessity that Zagzebski concluded was not appropriate to the traditional concept of temporal necessity. Necessity *de re*, on the other hand, is the necessity of an object—specifically, the necessity of an object's exemplification of a given property. The following examples will help to refresh the reader's memory of this distinction:

- (1) 'All bachelors are unmarried' is necessarily true.
- (2) The number three is necessarily prime.

(1) is a *de dicto* attribution of necessity. It involves the claim that the truth of the given proposition is one of necessity. (2) is a *de re* attribution, which is a claim about the object referred to by the expression 'the number three'—specifically, a claim about that object's exemplification of the property of being prime. In every possible world in which that object exists, it is prime. Thus

a *de re* attribution of necessity is a claim about an object, namely, the claim that some property is essential to it; whereas a *de dicto* attribution of necessity is a claim about the modal status of a proposition's truth value.

Now, then, how might our notion of temporal necessity apply *de dicto*? According to Zagzebski, it cannot do so. Intuitively, temporal necessity is a notion about the fixity of past events, not about the fixity of propositions about the past. Furthermore, for the logical fatalist truth is eternal: the law of excluded middle applies to all propositions, regardless of their tense or subject matter. So if the logical fatalist is unwilling to relativise truth temporally, it is unlikely that he would be willing to relativise the modal status of truth temporally—in which case we should be wary of attributing the Type I argument to the sincere fatalist. Nevertheless, for the sake of the analysis, let us consider how we might formulate an attribution of temporal necessity *de dicto*. Consider the following claim (I assume throughout that the embedded proposition in (3) is true):

- (3) 'Susan goes to Anstruther at t ' is temporally necessarily true.

To make it clear that it is the necessity of the past that is intended, we can modify (3) in the following manner:

- (3*) 'Susan goes to Anstruther at t ' is (temporally) necessarily true at $t + n$.

Now apply a similar formulation to our example proposition from the Type I argument, and we have the following:

- (4) 'At t_1 it was the case that at t_3 Susan will go to Anstruther' is (temporally) necessarily true at t_2 .

Following Zagzebski, we concluded that (4) was false because temporal necessity is a concept originating in our intuitions about past events and states of affairs, not past propositions; and (4)'s corresponding state of affairs is not the sort to which those intuitions apply. What about (3*), though? If, indeed, Susan does go to Anstruther at t , then that event is temporally necessary after t , and therefore (3*) would seem to be a valid application of temporal necessity *de dicto*. So perhaps, after all, temporal necessity *does* apply to certain propositions. But notice the

procedure we have had to use in order to determine the truth of (3*) and the falsity of (4). We have had *first* to determine whether the given proposition's corresponding event is temporally necessary, and only then could we determine whether the given proposition itself is temporally necessary. We will revisit this point in a moment.

Now consider the *de re* application of temporal necessity. Given that necessity *de re* is the necessity of an object's exemplification of a property, we should think of the event in question in any attribution of temporal necessity *de re* as an object. Accordingly, we can convert (3) into its corresponding *de re* claim:

(5) Susan's going to Anstruther at t is temporally necessary.

Again, since temporal necessity is simply the necessity of the past, we can make the temporal relativity of (5) explicit:

(5*) Susan's going to Anstruther at t is a (temporally) necessary event at $t + n$.

But this is still not quite what we are looking for, since we are trying to show *what it is* for an event to be (temporally) necessary, and (5*) is not informative on that point. We need to determine what property a temporally necessary event, as the object of a *de re* claim, might exemplify essentially. It would seem the most likely candidate would be that of fixity. If conceiving of the past as necessary is motivated by the fact that past events have *occurred*, and the occurrence of an event is a matter of that event becoming fixed, then all events that are temporally necessary must share the property of fixity. So a temporally necessary event is one that exemplifies the property of fixity necessarily. We can now modify (5*) to get what we're after:

(5**) Susan's going to Anstruther at t is a (temporally) necessarily fixed event at $t + n$.

So apparently (5**) best captures what it means for the given event to be temporally necessary. It is a *de re* modal claim about an event's exemplification of the property of fixity.

As we saw above, the procedure for determining whether a *proposition* legitimately admits of temporal necessity involves first determining whether it applies to the proposition's corresponding

event. So, what our analysis of the *de dicto/de re* application of temporal necessity shows is that temporal necessity *de dicto* only seems to apply—if it applies at all—derivatively, and *in virtue of* its *de re* application. Now compare this with (1), our original *de dicto* example. Does an evaluation of that claim require the same procedure? Of course not. (1) is true in virtue of the analyticity of the proposition ‘All bachelors are unmarried’, not in virtue of any *de re* claims about the constituents of that proposition. As a matter of fact, there are many *de dicto* claims that do not have the same truth value as their corresponding *de re* claims; whereas in the case of temporal necessity *de dicto*, a given claim *must* have the same truth value as its corresponding *de re* claim. Indeed, the latter *determines* the former.

These observations, though not definitive, call into question the modal legitimacy of temporal necessity. Its temporal relativity makes it an unlikely tool for any proponent of eternal truth, and the fact that it functions in ways very different from our standard modal notions, casts doubt on the plausibility of its use in the Type I argument. At least, one wonders whether a modal notion that functions so differently in its *de dicto/de re* applications, might not also function differently in its logic. If it does, then we have reason to question the modal inference relied upon in Type I.

If Zagzebski’s conclusions are correct, Type I fails. Why, then, the need to cast further doubt on Type I with my extended analysis of temporal necessity? The reason is that questioning the modal legitimacy of the concept can help us to better understand the logical fatalist’s real motivation. This understanding, in turn, will allow us to identify the real threat to the non-fixity of the future. In order to bring out these points, I would briefly like to take up the role of fatalist’s advocate with respect to the *Type II* argument, and then conclude by suggesting a shift in the anti-fatalist’s argumentative strategy.

On my analysis of temporal necessity *de re*, we saw that a temporally necessary event, such as *Susan’s going to Anstruther at t*, is (temporally) necessarily fixed at $t + n$. But notice, then, that an attribution of temporal necessity *de re* actually requires the attribution of *two* properties. There is the first order property, fixity; and there is the second order, modal property, temporal necessity. The latter involves the modal claim that the fixity of the

event is essential to it (the event exemplifies this property necessarily). Thus, in order to cash out the *de re* claim of temporal necessity, we needed to include the additional claim of fixity. The distinction between these two properties gives the fatalist room to claim that he is innocent of the modal fallacy attributed to him in his Type II argument. For, he can deny that he ever intended to attribute *necessity* to future events based on the present truth of their corresponding propositions, and claim that he was merely attributing *fixity* to them on that basis; in which case the modal fallacy objection does not go through.

Now, I must admit that I am quite baffled by what it might mean for an event to be (temporally) necessarily fixed. Perhaps fixity is like existence, in that any object that has it, does so essentially. So perhaps there are no (temporally) contingently fixed events. The analysis is not, however, meant to show the way temporal necessity *actually* works; it is meant to show how it might work if the notion were *actually* viable. The analysis has demonstrated that temporal necessity is a very odd modal notion, and that it is gratuitous in light of the requirement to include fixity in all its attributions. These results suggest that the notion is *not* a viable one, and that our intuitions about the permanence of the past are best captured simply by the *non*-modal notion of fixity. At least, they suggest that if the permanence of the past does involve modality, it is a modality that cannot be captured by the box operator of modal logic. So the lesson to be taken from the analysis is not so much that temporal necessity and fixity come apart, but that temporal necessity is a misnomer and should be discarded altogether.

Finally, these observations give us reason to think that the logical fatalist, in claiming that future events are fixed and unavoidable, is *not* making a claim that can be expressed and evaluated with modal logic. He is making a claim about the nature of truth: regardless of its modality, truth is, in some non-modal sense, permanent. What is true (today) about tomorrow *cannot* be false tomorrow, even if that truth is a contingent one. So it is not that the truth about tomorrow *could not have been* other than what it is, but simply that it *is not* other than what it is, and therefore is not within our power to affect. And it is this fact that seems to impugn the autonomy of our will.³

Thus what my extended analysis of temporal necessity shows is that the real threat of fatalism comes from what might seem the unlikely direction of antecedent truth value, and that *this* is where the counter offensive should be focused.⁴

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3. Clearly, even if I am correct that fixity is not a modal notion, it does have modal ramifications (inevitability, causal imperviousness, etc.); but, again, these are not ones that can be expressed in modal logic or possible worlds semantics. This is why, to the participants in the fatalist/anti-fatalist debate, it matters very little whether the actual future is only contingently fixed (i.e., whether the future is not fixed—or is fixed differently—in other possible worlds), or whether it is necessarily fixed. Either way, both parties to the debate would agree that fatalism follows.

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