

A NOTE ON THEOLOGICAL FATALISM<sup>1</sup>*Alex Blum*

**ABSTRACT:** We contend that a very seductive argument for theological fatalism fails. In the course of our discussion we point out that theological fatalism is incompatible with the existence of a being who is omnipotent, omniscient and infallible. We suggest that 'possible' formalized as ' $\diamond$ ' is to be understood as 'can or could have been' and not simply as 'can'. The argument we discuss conflates the two. We end by rounding out, hopefully, some left over corners of serious concern to the theist.

**KEYWORDS:** God, can or could have been, cannot, counterfactual,  $\diamond$ .

## I

The orthodox theist who worries about the compatibility of God's infallibility with human freedom is faced with a serious problem. For if the existence of an omniscient and infallible being precludes human freedom it then precludes divine freedom as well. In which case a divine being cannot be omniscient, infallible as well as omnipotent.

We shall present what we take to be the strongest argument for theological fatalism and show that while the argument is valid it misses its intended target. By missing its intended target the argument illustrates a surprising anomaly in the standard formalization of 'cannot'.

The argument for theological fatalism that worries the orthodox pivots on the "cannot" that on his view divine infallibility implies.<sup>2</sup> He ar-

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<sup>1</sup> This paper includes and extends my paper (2005). The original paper (section I) is here included with the kind permission of Ashgate Publishers Ltd. ([www.ashgate.com](http://www.ashgate.com)). A version of the whole paper was read at Charles University in Prague. I'm deeply grateful for the hospitality of my hosts and for their comments. The trip would have never come about but for Dr Juraj Hvorecky. I thank Professor Vojtech Kolman for his invitation and for providing the forum for the lecture. I thank him as well for having assigned his gifted student Martin Fontan to be our guide.

A version of section I was read at the University of Miami. I thank Harvey Siegel for inviting me and for the sharp criticisms that I received from him and his colleague Ed Erwin and from my colleague David Widerker. My deepest debt however is to Michael Clark for the numerous exchanges which led me to see what I was really after.

gues that the impossibility of error involved in divine infallibility entails that if an essentially infallible being were to predict that Bill would raise his arm at  $t$ , then necessarily Bill will raise his arm at  $t$ . For the infallible being cannot err even in principle. And if it would be logically possible for Bill not to raise his arm at  $t$  then per impossible it would be logically possible for the infallible being to err.

The argument is seductive but the crucial distinction it invokes is spurious. We may formulate the argument as follows:

1. If  $p$  is true, then it cannot be the case that God believes that ' $\sim p$ ' is true.<sup>3</sup> (Essential Infallibility)
2. If it cannot be the case that God believes that ' $\sim p$ ' is true, then ' $\sim p$ ' cannot be true.<sup>4</sup> (Implied by Omniscience)

Therefore:

3. If  $p$  is true, then ' $\sim p$ ' cannot be true.

The argument fails to establish the desired conclusion. For what is wanted is not 3 but:

- 3\*. If  $p$  is true, then ' $\sim p$ ' neither can nor could it have been true.

However in order to get 3\* the 'cannot be' in 1 would have to be replaced by 'neither can nor could it have been'. But the revised 1 can hardly be granted. For the revised 1 is but a short step away from the intended conclusion 3\*. And surely we wouldn't grant:

- 1\*. If  $p$  is true, then it neither can nor could it have been the case that God believes that ' $\sim p$ ' is true.

For where  $p$  is contingent,  $p$  could have been false and thus God could have believed that ' $\sim p$ ' is true.

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<sup>2</sup> The belief in question has the form: 'Nec[If  $p$  then God cannot believe that  $\sim p$ ]' rather than the seemingly weaker 'Nec[If  $p$  then God does not believe that  $\sim p$ ]'. Our conclusion is that they are equivalent.

<sup>3</sup> Single quotes are meant to serve as corner quotes as well.

<sup>4</sup> Suppose we deny 2. We assume that God cannot believe that ' $\sim p$ ' is true and yet ' $\sim p$ ' is possibly true. But then since if ' $\sim p$ ' is true God believes that ' $\sim p$ ' is true; if it is possible for  $\sim p$  to be true, then it is possible for God to believe that ' $\sim p$ ' is true. But we assume that God cannot believe that  $\sim p$  is true. But then contrary to the second conjunct of our assumption ' $\sim p$ ' cannot be true.

A close look at 3 makes it difficult to see how 3 can ever be questioned. For the denial of 3 implies that even if it is true that Socrates died it still can be the case, as opposed to it could have been the case, that he is alive. But can it be the case that although Socrates *is* dead he may be alive? Hence 3 is misleadingly trivial. However, if 3 is undeniable, as we claim,<sup>5</sup> then how do we explain its seemingly questionable contrapositive, namely:

3'. If ' $\sim p$ ' can be true, then  $p$  is not true.

But is 3' as opposed to the clearly false:

3\*. If ' $\sim p$ ' could have been true then  $p$  is not true

really questionable? For, again, how can it be that although  $p$  is true, ' $\sim p$ ' may still be (as opposed to could have been) true?

Interestingly, it would thus seem that the sense of 'possible' canonized by the modal operator ' $\diamond$ ' is not 'can' but 'can or could have been'.<sup>6</sup> And that ' $\sim \diamond$ ' formalizes not 'it can not be that',<sup>7</sup> but rather 'it neither can nor could it have been that'.

## II

We have argued that what is, cannot be otherwise, although if contingent it could have been otherwise. And that the sense of 'possible' canonized by the modal operator ' $\diamond$ ' is not 'can' but 'can or could have been'. So that ' $\sim \diamond$ ' formalizes not 'it can not be that', but rather 'it neither can nor could it have been that'. This would seem to rectify the apparent inconsistency which gives rise to theological fatalism. For if what is or is not, cannot be otherwise, then God's foreknowledge is just an infallible

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<sup>5</sup> Support for this view may be found in von Wright (1957). He writes: "I would understand Aristotle's thought thus: relative to the hypothesis (supposition) that it is true, a proposition *cannot* be but true (is necessarily true). Thus *not*: if a proposition is true, then it is (absolutely) necessary. But: if a proposition is *true*, it is self-necessary... In symbols:  $p \rightarrow N(p/p)$ . And this as we have seen... is a truth of the logic of relative modalities" (von Wright 1957, 122).

<sup>6</sup> The distinction between 'can' and 'could have been' is well enshrined in the claim that while the past is unchangeable, that is, that the past can not be other than what it is, it nevertheless could have been different from what it is.

<sup>7</sup> Otherwise, ' $p \rightarrow \sim \diamond \sim p$ ' would be valid, and we'd have a collapse of modalities.

record of these facts. The propositions about the future actions of the agent are true because of what the agent in fact performs at the time of the performance. Or to put it differently, a sentence has the truth value that its truth-value maker gives it.<sup>8</sup>

If the truth-value maker was freely reached the action is free and otherwise not. If Bill freely raised his hand at  $t_1$ , then while it is true that things could have been different, nothing can be different from what in fact it is.

But isn't it true that if God already sees at  $t_0$  that Bill will raise his hand at  $t_1$ , then not only will Bill raise his hand at  $t_1$  but it is also true that he cannot refrain from raising it at  $t_1$ . Yes, but all this follows from the fact that at  $t_1$  he will raise his hand. God's infallible belief of  $t_0$  only registers this fact. For given that a sentence has the truth value that its truth-value maker gives it, the fact that God cannot be mistaken is idle. But does it not follow from the proposition that Bill could have done otherwise that God could have been mistaken? No, unless per impossible God could not have known that Bill could have done otherwise.

But if whatever is cannot be other than what it is, how is it that Bill is not prevented from doing other than what he actually does? For Bill did not have to do what he does in fact. God sees the future we bring about he does not derive it from the past.

### III

"Counterfactuals of freedom" threatens to undermine the picture we have painted of God reading off the truth of a proposition from what has or will happen. For, suppose Smith insulted Bill and Bill fired him. What if Smith would have apologized would Bill still have fired Smith? God would have to know. But God's infallible knowledge here would not merely be a record of what in fact is or will be the case but knowledge of what would have been the case. How could Bill then do otherwise?

We prefer to approach counterfactuals as justified or not, rather than as true or false.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> This view is shared by Jonathan Westphal in his recent Westphal (2006).

<sup>9</sup> A view shared by Dorothy Eddington (1995, 311 – 323).

*A Note on Theological Fatalism*

*Department of Philosophy  
Bar-Ilan University  
Ramat-Gan 52900, Israel  
blumal@mail.biu.ac.il*

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