

# The Rejection of Fatalism about the Past

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**ABSTRACT:** In this paper I defend the rejection of fatalism about the past by showing that there are possible circumstances in which it would be rational to attempt to bring about by our decisions and actions a necessary and sufficient condition, other things being equal, for something which we see as favorable to have occurred in the past. The examples I put forward are analogous to our attempts to bring about the occurrence of future events, and demonstrate the symmetry between the past and the future in this respect.

**KEYWORDS:** Fatalism – Future – Past – Richard Taylor – Symmetry.

## 1.

According to a common sense view there is a fundamental asymmetry between the past and the future. This asymmetry is reflected by the fact that people usually reject fatalism about the future while adopting fatalism about the past. In this paper I defend the rejection of fatalism about the past. My rejection of fatalism about the past relies on the rejection of fatalism about the future. I shall not try to defend the rejection of fatalism about the future in the scope of this paper, and assume that it is rational to attempt to bring about the occurrence of future events. I shall merely argue that the rejection of fatalism about

the future implies the rejection of fatalism about the past. While there is an asymmetry between the past and the future in respect of their relative independence of our decisions and actions, for the past is more independent of our decisions and actions than the future, this is a difference of degree rather than a difference of kind.

The term “fatalism” is used in different ways by different writers and in different contexts. Taylor defines fatalism about the future as the view that one cannot do anything about the future (cf. Taylor 1962a, 56). If this view is not vacuous, it must have a practical implication on the way we conduct ourselves. Hence, fatalism about the future is the view that there is no point in attempting to bring about, by our decisions and actions, future occurrences. In analogy, fatalism about the past is therefore the view that it is irrational to attempt to bring about, by our decisions and actions, past occurrences. Hence, rejecting fatalism about the future implies rejecting the analogous attitude towards the past. (For a similar claim, see Markosian 1995).

I should stress that I do not argue that we have the power to change the past, that is, to make happen what did not in fact happen, as Taylor sometimes carelessly describes the rejection of fatalism about the past (see Taylor 1962b, 26). This involves a contradiction, just like the analogous claim about the future, which states that we can change the future (cf. Makepeace 1962, 29).

Furthermore, I do not argue that it is possible to influence the past—a claim which involves a reversed causality. The possibility of reversed causality was interestingly suggested by Taylor himself in an earlier paper (see Chisholm & Taylor 1960). However, I believe that the idea of a reversed causality involves a contradiction. This is not due to any inherent asymmetry between the past and the future, but because of an asymmetry in the concept of causality, according to which a cause always precedes its effect (cf. Hume 1978, 76). I shall not attempt, in the scope of this paper, to defend this claim. Due to the fact that the conceptual possibility of backwards causation is debatable, I shall assume for the sake of the argument that backwards causation does not occur.

Without committing to a general account of causation in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions, in many circumstances in which we attempt to bring about a future event we consider our action as a necessary and sufficient condition, other things being equal, for the occurrence of this event. Hence, I argue that just as it is rational in certain circumstances to attempt to bring about by our decisions and actions a necessary and sufficient condition for something to

occur in the future (that is, to affect the future), there are possible circumstances in which it is rational to attempt to bring about by our decisions and actions a necessary and sufficient condition for something to have occurred in the past. Notice that I do not argue that it is possible to bring about, by our decisions and actions, past occurrences. This claim involves backwards causation, due to the fact that “bring about” is a causal term, which in this paper I assume is impossible. Rather, I argue that it is possible to *bring about future* occurrences, whether they are our actions or effects of our actions, that are a necessary and sufficient condition for something to have occurred in the *past*.

This analogy may seem disappointing in light of previous attempts to establish the possibility of backwards causation. For an attempt to establish the symmetry between the past and the future which discards the element of causality seems to relinquish from the analogy an important aspect of our attempt to influence the future, and thus is in danger of reducing into triviality.

I agree that without the element of causality some of the examples found in the literature of alleged backwards causation reduce into triviality. However, this is not due to the lack of the causal element, but rather because they neglect the most important aspect of our attempts to influence the future. That is, they fail to show that there are possible circumstances in which one should *take into account*, while deciding how to act, the need to bring about a necessary and sufficient condition for the occurrence of past events. Nerlich, for example, who claims that we actually are continually doing things that make earlier things have happened, flatly denies that actions can ever be *intended* in order to make things have happened (cf. Nerlich 1994, 247; 269; 271). Lacking this element, all these claims remain purely theoretical, devoid of any implication on our attitudes towards past events or any practical implication on the way we conduct ourselves in the world.

I show in what follows that there are circumstances in which one *should take into account*, while considering what to do, the need to bring about by our decisions and actions a necessary and sufficient condition for a favorable past event. That is, in this paper I defend the rejection of fatalism about the past by showing that there are possible circumstances in which it would be rational to attempt to bring about by our decisions and actions a necessary and sufficient condition, other things being equal, for something which we see as favorable to have occurred in the past. The examples I put forward are analogous to our attempts to bring about the occurrence of future events, and demonstrate the symmetry between the past and the future in this respect.

In section 2, I argue that Taylor (1962a) has relied on a false analogy in order to support the seeming absurdity of rejecting fatalism about the past. I show that once the analogous scenario for our attempt to shape the future is correctly formulated, not only it does not describe an absurdity, it actually describes a surprisingly trivial scenario. In section 3, I present examples for possible circumstances in which it would be rational to attempt to bring about by our decisions and actions a necessary and sufficient condition for something to have occurred in the past. If there is an asymmetry between the past and the future in this respect, it is simply a matter of contingent fact that the future is more susceptible to our decisions and actions than the past. I summarize the conclusion of my paper in section 4.

## 2.

Let us begin by considering a classic example, which originates from Aristotle, regarding the occurrence of a future naval battle (cf. Aristotle 1963, 19a23). Suppose that a naval commander examines two possibilities. The possibilities are either to attack the enemy tomorrow or to prevent the occurrence of any naval battle. These possibilities depend on his actions. If he issues an order to the fleet to move ahead and attack the enemy a naval battle will occur tomorrow. If he does not issue the order the battle will not occur. He decides that it would be best to attack tomorrow. In order to ensure that a naval battle will occur tomorrow, he issues an order to the fleet to move ahead and attack the enemy.

Assuming determinism, it has been argued by Taylor (1962a) that the case should be symmetrical for the past. If one rejects fatalism about the future, one should also reject fatalism about the past. However, rejecting fatalism about the past seems untenable, as Taylor demonstrated by the use of an example. Hence, Taylor adopts fatalism about both the past and the future.

Taylor's argument for fatalism about the future was criticized extensively, and is widely agreed to be unsound (see, e.g., van Inwagen 1983, 43-50). On the other hand, Taylor's criticism of rejecting fatalism about the past is widely accepted. Most philosophers have denied the alleged symmetry between the past and the future (for a recent attempt, see Diekemper 2005). Nevertheless, there are philosophers who argue for the rejection of fatalism about the past (see, for example, Nerlich 1994, 251-253). To defend this option, I show in

what follows that Taylor has relied on a false analogy in order to support the seeming absurdity of rejecting fatalism about the past.

Taylor relies on the following example for demonstrating the alleged absurdity of rejecting fatalism about the past (Taylor 1962a, 59). Suppose that Taylor (Taylor uses the first person in his example) is about to open a newspaper. It is assumed that the headline would declare the occurrence of the battle only if it occurred yesterday, and declare otherwise if it did not occur. Let us call him seeing the first headline act *S*, and him seeing the second headline act *S'*. It is not in his powers, Taylor argues, to do *S*, or it is not in his powers to do *S'*. That is, it is not up to him what headline he will read. Taylor explains this inability by the fact that the sort of headline he would see depends on the occurrence of the naval battle, and that is not up to him (cf. Taylor 1962a, 60).

Obviously, one example cannot prove the fatalistic view of the past. There may be other examples which show that it is up to us, in certain circumstances, to influence what has happened in the past. I address this possibility in the next section of my paper. My current interest is to show that the example Taylor uses in order to demonstrate our inability to influence the past is not the correct analogy for an attempt to influence the future.

To begin with, it should be noted that Taylor's description of his actions actually insures that it is not up to him whether he does *S* or *S'*. For it is up to an agent to decide whether to read the newspaper or not, but it is not up to the agent what headline he reads. Our use of the senses depends (to some degree) on our will. We use the senses, however, to gather information about our environment, and in this respect we are merely passive observers. In this sense, it is not up to anyone what headline he reads. It is also not up to the naval commander what headline he reads about the occurrence of tomorrow's naval battle, even if it is up to him whether the naval battle occurs tomorrow.

Obviously, there is a sense in which it is up to us what we perceive. That is, we can influence what we perceive if we can influence our environment. If I can paint my walls white, there is a sense in which it can be said that it is up to me what I see when I watch the walls.

According to this interpretation of Taylor's example, it is not up to Taylor what headline he will read simply because it is not up to him whether the naval battle occurred yesterday. This is not because the past is determinate, but rather because he is not, for example, in command of the fleet. Hence, it is also not up to Taylor what headline he will read even if it is assumed that the headline

correctly predicts whether the naval battle will occur *tomorrow*, simply because it is not up to him whether the naval battle will occur tomorrow. It is up to the naval commander, on the other hand, what headline he will read, in the sense that he can directly influence the occurrence of the naval battle tomorrow, by issuing an order to the troops for example.

Furthermore, Taylor's example about the occurrence of the naval battle yesterday is not analogous to his example about the occurrence of the naval battle tomorrow in another important respect. When one attempts to influence future occurrences, one wishes at time  $t_1$  to perform at time  $t_2$  an action  $A$ , which is a necessary and sufficient condition, other things being equal, for the occurrence of  $O$  at time  $t_3$ , which one sees (at  $t_1$ ) as favorable, such that  $t_1 < t_2 < t_3$ .

Taylor's example for demonstrating the fatalistic view of the past, on the other hand, describes a scenario in which one wishes at time  $t_1$  to perform at time  $t_2$  an action  $A$ , which is a necessary and sufficient condition, other things being equal, for the occurrence of  $O$  at time  $t_3$ , such that  $t_3 < t_1 < t_2$ . In analogy, this is just like pointing to the present inability of the naval commander to have performed a past action which is a necessary and sufficient condition for a future occurrence.

After recognizing the shortcomings of Taylor's example for demonstrating the fatalistic view of the past, let us try to describe the correct analogy for the naval commander's attempt to influence occurrence of the naval battle tomorrow: The naval commander wishes now (time  $t_1$ ) to have performed at time  $t_2$  an action  $A$ , which is a necessary and sufficient condition, other things being equal, for the occurrence of  $O$  yesterday (time  $t_3$ ), such that  $t_3 < t_2 < t_1$ . This action, for example, could be issuing an order this morning ( $t_2$ ) for the troops to regroup following their victory.

Now that the correct analogy has been formulated, it is clear that it does not involve any contradiction or absurdity. Notice that the epistemic ignorance of the naval commander, about the occurrence of the naval battle yesterday and his actions this morning, is necessary for the analogy. For it is meaningful for the naval commander to attempt to act in order to bring about the occurrence of the naval battle tomorrow only if he does not already know that these occurrences will happen.

Admittedly, it looks strange that the subject does not know what he did this morning, but this is surely not an impossibility. This is clear if we consider the case in which an aging naval commander is reflecting on his long military career. He does not remember whether a certain naval battle occurred, about 50

years ago, and tries to remember his own actions. He seems to remember that he has issued an order for the troops to regroup following their victory, and hopes that he did issue that order.

If there is an asymmetry between the past and the future in this respect, therefore, it is merely an asymmetry in our knowledge of past and future occurrences, and especially of our own actions. We simply know more about the past than we do about the future. I return to this point in what follows.

It might, however, seem that something is missing from this analogy. When the naval commander contemplates the possible occurrence of a future naval battle, he wishes to bring about the occurrence of this battle with the help of his act. He *intends* to perform an action that would bring about the occurrence of the naval battle tomorrow. On the other hand, when the naval commander contemplates the possible occurrence of a past naval battle, he merely *wishes* that it had occurred.

Admittedly, the term “intends” cannot be applied equally to past actions. The naval commander intends to perform a future action, but cannot “intend to have performed” a past action. However, rather than reflecting an asymmetry between the past and the future, this impossibility reflects an asymmetry in the concept of causality. The analysis of intentions goes beyond the scope of this paper, but what is relevant in our case is a certain “pro” attitude, perhaps a wish, towards a certain action, which will be fulfilled by causing this action.

As I have already made clear, I believe that reversed causality contradicts an inherent asymmetry in our concepts of cause and effect. One cannot therefore “intend to have performed” a past action. This asymmetry, however, does not reflect any asymmetry in our conception of the past and the future. It simply reflects an asymmetry in the concept of causality. The previous examples show that just as events can depend on previous actions and wishes of an agent, events can also depend on subsequent actions and wishes of an agent.

### 3.

The conclusion of the previous section may seem disappointing, in light of the seeming triviality of the analogy for our attempts to influence the future. Although it sheds light on the symmetry between the past and the future

it does not imply any change in our attitude towards the past. More specifically, the analogy which is revealed so far does not show that there are circumstances in which one should take into account, while considering what to do, the need to bring about a necessary and sufficient condition for a favorable past event.

Furthermore, it might be expected, given the symmetry between the past and the future, that this possibility would be available. For if later actions can constitute necessary and sufficient conditions, other things being equal, for previous occurrences, why is it not the case that we are taking into consideration, while planning our future actions, the need to bring about the necessary and sufficient conditions for the occurrence of favorable past events?

In this section I show that there is an analogy for our ability to influence future events, which is directed towards past events. Just as it is rational in certain circumstances to attempt to bring about, by our decisions and actions, a necessary and sufficient condition for something to occur in the future (that is, to influence the future), there are possible circumstances in which it would be rational to attempt to bring about, by our decisions and actions, a necessary and sufficient condition for something to have occurred in the past.

Let us begin by describing an example for an attempt to bring about, by the agent's decisions and actions, a necessary and sufficient condition for the occurrence of future events, and then attempt to describe an analogous example, in which it would be rational to attempt to bring about, by the agent's decisions and actions, a necessary and sufficient condition for the occurrence of past events.

Consider the following example. Naomi visits the doctor, who informs her that she has a high level of cholesterol and she must keep a strict diet from now on if she wants to increase her chances of living a long and healthy life. Naomi, who read philosophy for her B.A., points out to the doctor that the future is determinate, and therefore it is irrational on her part to attempt to do anything about the future. As it is already determined that she will, or will not, live a long and healthy life, she does not need to change her diet. It is irrational on her part to start a diet.

However, the doctor points out to Naomi that the fact that the future is determinate does not imply that her decisions and actions are useless. The claim that her future is determined causally, for example, implies that future occurrences are determined at least partly by her choices and actions. It is a fact that people who keep a strict diet tend to live longer and enjoy better health, while

those who do not suffer from a variety of diseases. The fact that her decisions are themselves determinate is neither here nor there. Deciding to begin a strict diet and keeping to it is a necessary and sufficient condition for a better future, and so this is the rational choice for her to make. Furthermore, although her decision may itself be determinate, it is not something that is independent of her own considerations. If she is convinced by the fatalist argument, she is doomed, if not, she can expect good health. The rational thing for her to do is therefore to make the decision and keep her diet. I think most of us would agree that the doctor is right, and so the rational thing for Naomi to do is to accept the doctor's advice and begin to diet.

Consider now another scenario. Naomi goes to the doctor. The doctor informs her that in light of a history of high cholesterol levels in her family she herself is more likely to suffer from a high level of cholesterol. Hence if she wants to live a long and healthy life she must follow a strict diet. The doctor also tells her about a recent medical discovery. Biologists have discovered that the correlation between a high level of cholesterol and diet is not the result of a direct link between the two. A third element is involved. A gene has been identified, which is at once associated both with a high level of cholesterol and a general lack of care for health. Research has shown that people who are concerned about their health and who do manage to follow a strict diet over a long period do not carry this gene, and therefore also enjoy low levels of cholesterol and good health. People who are not concerned about their health, and fail to follow a strict diet over a long period, do carry this gene, and therefore also have high levels of cholesterol. Hence, deciding to begin a strict diet and keeping to it is a necessary and sufficient condition for a better future. The doctor therefore recommends Naomi to keep a strict diet, in order to ensure that she will enjoy a long and healthy life.

Naomi might object that the doctor is advising her to do something impossible, that is, to affect the past. Surely, if she carries this gene from birth, it is irrational of her to attempt to avoid inheriting this gene by her present decision and future actions. Either she has already inherited this gene, and therefore it is pointless for her to keep a strict diet, or she did not inherit this gene, and therefore it is pointless for her to keep a strict diet. The most that deciding and keeping her diet can do is indicate whether she carries this gene or not, but she cannot do anything about the past. That is, the only function that her attempt to keep a strict diet can serve is epistemological, that is, it can teach her that she does not carry this gene, and that she can expect to live a long and healthy life.

In response, the doctor tells Naomi that backwards causation is not involved here. The relevant factor is that there is a natural law which establishes a link between caring about one's health by adhering to a strict diet and the absence of this gene. If Naomi decides to the contrary, regardless of her reasons (for example, she might be persuaded by fatalistic considerations about the past), she carries the gene, and her future is not bright. If she does decide to keep a strict diet, she does not carry this gene, and will enjoy a long and healthy life. If the rational thing for Naomi to do in the previous example is to accept the doctor's advice and begin to diet, by analogy it is also the rational thing to do in this example.

Some may object that her decision to keep a strict diet is merely a way of finding out whether she carries the gene or not (Dummett, for example, discusses a similar objection—see Dummett 1954, 35-37). In this respect this example seems asymmetrical with attempts to influence the future, for in these latter cases we are trying to bring about an occurrence, rather than merely discover whether it is about to occur or not.

In order to tackle this objection, the difference between attempting to bring about something and merely trying to find out whether something occurs or not should be clarified. To begin with, if the naval commander wishes to bring about the occurrence of the naval battle tomorrow, he attempts to perform an action which is a necessary and sufficient condition for the occurrence of the naval battle. For example, he can issue a command for the troops to attack the enemy fleet. If the naval commander merely wants to know whether the naval battle will occur tomorrow, he will usually perform an action which is a sufficient condition for *knowing* whether the naval battle will occur or not. For example, he can read intelligence reports on the position and possible intentions of the enemy. Notice that his action is not a sufficient condition for the battle to occur or not.

Similarly, if Naomi only wants to find out whether she carries the gene or not she can perform a genetic test. Her taking the genetic test is neither a sufficient condition for her carrying the gene, nor for her not carrying the gene (notice the analogy for reading the headline in order to find out whether a naval battle occurred yesterday or not). If Naomi keeps a strict diet, on the other hand, it is a necessary and sufficient condition for not carrying the gene. Hence, her attempt to keep a strict diet is not merely an attempt to discover whether she carries the gene or not, and is symmetrical with an attempt to bring about future occurrences.

In many cases, therefore, when one attempts to find out whether an event is about to happen, one's actions are not a sufficient condition for the occurrence or the non-occurrence of this event. There are, however, cases in which one attempts to perform an action which is a sufficient condition for the occurrence of an event, in order to find out whether this event occurred or not. For example, one can attempt to raise one's right hand in order to find out whether the surgery which was supposed to recover the mobility in the right arm was successful. Surely, in this case one is not trying to secure the success of the surgery that has been undergone, but merely to find out whether the surgery was successful or not.

The difference between the last example and Naomi's attempt to keep a strict diet is that Naomi is trying to provide a *necessary* and sufficient condition, other things being equal, for not inheriting this gene. The raising of the arm, on the other hand, is merely a sufficient condition for the success of the surgery. Hence, if one does not want to know whether the surgery was successful, and refuses to attempt to raise one's arm, one's decision and actions do not imply anything regarding the success of the surgery. In this case it is justified to say that an attempt to raise the arm is merely a way to find out whether the surgery was successful or not.

Naomi's attempt to keep a strict diet is therefore unlike an attempt to discover whether she carries a gene which is associated, for example, with the Tay-Sachs disease. The existence of the Tay-Sachs gene does not depend on her decision to examine its existence, or indeed on any decision or action she makes. Hence, her only consideration is epistemological, that is, whether she wants to know if she carries the gene or not. However, Naomi's attempt to keep a strict diet is different, and she should consider the fact that her decision and action can constitute a necessary and sufficient condition for her not carrying this gene, which would ensure that she lives a long and healthy life, or for her carrying this gene. It is an attempt to bring about by our decisions and actions a necessary and sufficient condition, other things being equal, for something to have occurred in the past.

So far I have described a scenario in which we aim to secure favorable future occurrences, that is, a long and healthy life. For this purpose, Naomi attempts to bring about, by her actions and decisions, a necessary and sufficient condition for something to have occurred in the past. This is not the only possible scenario in which one may be required to take into consideration, while deciding how to act, the need to bring about a necessary and

sufficient condition for something to have occurred in the past. Another possible scenario is one in which the subject's goal is a favorable past occurrence.

Consider the following scenario. Lucy is seeing a psychologist. She is afraid that she was abused as a child, but does not remember clearly what happened. In response, the psychologist tells her of a recent discovery she made. While attempting to use bungee jumping as a method for teaching her patients how to control their fears she uncovered a surprising correlation between refusal to engage in bungee jumping, for any reason at all, and a background of abuse in childhood. All and only the people who were abused in childhood, whether they had recollection of this abuse or not, either rejected the suggestion outright or withdraw at the last minute from jumping, relying on countless excuses for why they should not engage in this activity. Although she does not know how to explain this correlation, it is an established correlation. The psychologist then suggests that Lucy should bungee jump, just in order to ensure that she was not abused as a child.

Lucy might object that the psychologist is advising her to do something impossible, that is, to affect the past. She obviously prefers not to have been abused as a child. However, this is not up to her now. Although her bungee jumping may have an epistemological significance, that is, it can teach her that she was not abused, it cannot affect the past.

In response, the psychologist denies that reversed causality is involved here. The only relevant factor here is a correlation between her current decisions and actions and her past. Furthermore, it is not merely a way of discovering whether she was abused or not. An x-ray of her hand is a way of discovering whether she broke her hand as a child or not. In this latter case, her taking the test, or her refusal to be examined, does not imply anything about whether she broke her hand as a child or not. The only relevant consideration is whether she wants to know if she broke her hand or not. However, her refusal to bungee jump would imply that she was abused as a child, while her bungee jumping would imply that she was not abused as a child. The reason she should bungee jump is not epistemological, but rather to ensure that she was not abused as a child. The rational thing for Lucy to do, if she wants to ensure that she was not abused as a child, is to decide to do the bungee jump, that is, to attempt to bring about a necessary and sufficient condition for favorable past occurrences.

The two examples I have put forward in this section show that there are possible circumstances in which it would be rational to attempt to bring about,

by our decisions and actions, a necessary and sufficient condition for something to have occurred in the past, just as it is rational to attempt to bring about, by our own decisions and actions, a necessary and sufficient condition for something to occur in the future. Hence it seems that the only asymmetry between the past and the future in this respect lies in a contingent fact, according to which the past is more independent of our decisions and actions than the future.

#### 4.

The conclusion of this paper is that there are possible circumstances in which it would be rational to attempt to bring about, by our decisions and actions, a necessary and sufficient condition, other things being equal, for something to have occurred in the past. Although these attempts do not involve backwards causality, they are symmetrical with our attempts to bring about, by our own decisions and actions, a necessary and sufficient condition for something to occur in the future. Although the past is more independent of later intentions and actions than the future is independent of previous intentions and actions, this difference is a difference of degree rather than a difference of kind. That is, the difference between the past and the future in this respect rests on a contingent fact, rather than a genuine asymmetry between the past and the future.

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