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Fatalism and the Four Eternals

In this paper, I argue against Taylor’s thesis in “Fatalism” that the B-theorist must be a fatalist. To do this, I first define the terms fatalism and free will and list the six presuppositions Taylor claims if we accept, we must commit to fatalism. I elaborate on his two most important presuppositions: the law of excluded middle and the inefficacy of the passage of time. Then, I pose the criticism that Taylor’s clever use of tensed and tenseless language eliminates alternative possibilities needed for free will rather than shows why there are no alternative possibilities. Next, I suggest Taylor intends for a tenseless reading of his view, and under this reading, though it may be stipulative, his argument holds. Furthermore, I consider the idea put forth by Smith and Oaklander in “Fatalism and Tenseless Time” that if the detenser thinks of eternal as existing outside of time but containing time rather than existing in the entirety of time, the truth value of our actions is determined when they occur and exist outside of time, enabling us to have alternative possibilities. I state and evaluate Taylor’s response that allowing for possibilities as a third option of the law of the excluded middle is arbitrary and makes no difference for his account.

Additionally, I argue that Smith and Oaklander construct their definition of eternal in a stipulative manner to avoid fatalism. I claim that for the truth value of an action to occur inside time yet exist eternally outside of time does not imply that we have alternative possibilities. While the truth values of particular events exist outside of time, they exist somewhere else. As the eternal is outside of time, we have no way of assessing whether or not fatalism can be avoided with this additional extra-temporal space. All that is achieved with this view of eternal is that the eternal truth value of an action is revealed to us when the action occurs, which is no more than existing in the entirety of time. As Smith and Oaklander’s eternal does not enable the B-theorist to have free will, I propose a fourth definition of eternal using the simultaneous with relation in which the truth value of an action is assigned simultaneously with the action’s occurrence and the action then exists tenselessly only through relations with other events. Then, I show how this eternal survives against Taylor’s presuppositions. While this fourth definition of eternal may allow the detenser free will, I conclude that free will is still contingent on one’s choice of definition of eternal.

Before delving into Taylor’s argument, I will define the terms fatalism and free will and state the six presuppositions needed for Taylor’s argument to hold. Fatalism is the idea that what occurs in the future is already set or decided and cannot be changed much like how there is nothing we can do to alter those past events (Taylor 56). Since we cannot have any impact on future happenings, any deliberation about future choices is merely an illusion. Conversely, free will is the concept that we have alternative possibilities open to us and our choices and actions about these possibilities are within our power or come from us (Smith and Oaklander 120-1).

Now, for Taylor to maintain that the B-theorist must be a fatalist, he claims that the following six presuppositions must hold: the law of the excluded middle, the principle of sufficient condition, the principle of necessary condition, the relation between sufficient and necessary conditions, the occurrence of an act, and the inefficacy of the passage of time. The law of the excluded middle says that a statement cannot be both true and false; a statement must be either true or false. The idea that the passage of time is inefficacious means that the passage of time does not increase or diminish one’s power to make any choice or perform any action; there is something else other than the passage of time that affects one’s abilities (Taylor 58). Taylor claims that the law of the excluded middle and inefficacy of the passage of time are “inseparably linked” (Taylor 65). He says that we cannot allow the passage of time itself to determine the truth value of an action as it does not make sense to say while time is passing the truth value of an action is undetermined.

With these six presuppositions in place, Taylor presents his argument for fatalism using the example of a naval commander who can issue an order that *ensures* a naval battle will occur tomorrow or issue an order that *ensures* a naval battle will not occur tomorrow. In order to show that fatalism is true, Taylor constructs a proof demonstrating how it is not in the commander’s power to issue the order that *ensures* a naval battle will occur tomorrow and not within the commander’s power to issue an order that *ensures* a naval battle does not occur tomorrow. He says that if the event that a naval battle occurs tomorrow *is* true, then it is not within the commander’s power to issue the order that *ensures* a naval battle does not occur tomorrow. Likewise, if the event that a naval battle does not occur tomorrow *is* true, then it is not within the commander’s power to issue an order that *ensures* a naval battle occurs tomorrow. However, either a naval battle occurs or does not occur tomorrow. Therefore, it is not within your power to either issue an order that *ensures* a naval battle will occur tomorrow or issue an order that *ensures* that a naval battle will not occur tomorrow (Taylor 61). Taylor’s argument shows the truth value of the later occurrence or nonoccurrence of the naval battle determines which order the naval commander gives, so the naval commander does not have the power to decide which order to issue.

The problem with Taylor’s argument is the meaning of the word *is* and use of the word *ensures* seem to stipulate the fatalism, which Taylor is seeking to prove. Taylor does not mention how we are supposed to read his argument, which means that it is subject to both a tensed and tenseless reading. If we think of the phrase “a naval battle occurs tomorrow *is* true” tenselessly, then the truth value of the phrase exists tenselessly and in the totality of time. Since the truth value of the naval battle’s occurrence is known before the battle occurs, fatalism is true because regardless what the commander does the naval battle will occur tomorrow. If we read *is* in a tensed way, it may seem that the commander may issue any order he likes; however, it just so happens that the occurrence of a naval battle tomorrow is true. Yet, Taylor’s use of the word *ensures* prevents the commander from making any order he desires; he must make the appropriate order based on the truth value of the future naval battle’s occurrence or nonoccurrence.

So, Taylor designed his example and argument in a way that regardless of whether it is read tensed or tenselessly rids us of choice and alternative possibilities. Taylor’s argument does not demonstrate how there could possibly be no free will; instead, it uses stipulative language to provide for the lack of alternative possibilities he is trying to prove. Due to Taylor’s belief that the passage of time does not have any impact on one’s abilities, Taylor would say, like a B-theorist, that the passage of time is irrelevant and we must read the *is* tenselessly. So, it seems if we accept tenseless theory, then we must accept Taylor’s proof of fatalism.

However, if we are able to contradict any of Taylor’s six presuppositions, we can demonstrate that the B-theorist does not have to commit to fatalism. This course of action is precisely how Smith and Oaklander try to show that accepting B-theory does not make one a fatalist. Smith and Oaklander challenge Taylor’s presupposition of the law of the excluded middle and as a result the inefficacy of time presupposition. They claim that our understanding of what it means for something to be eternal is incorrect. The way we think of something as eternal is that it exists throughout time or from the beginning till the end of time. If we ascribe to this view, like Taylor, then we must accept fatalism. Smith and Oaklander refer to this version of eternal as eternal1, and propose two more definitions of eternal. For something to be eternal2, it exists outside of time and apart from any temporal relations and passage of time. If something is eternal3, the truth value of an entity is determined in time but the entity exists outside of time. For something to exist eternally3 means that it does not exist in time but that time exists inside it (Smith and Oaklander 127-8).

Smith and Oaklander claim that eternal3 can provide for the alternative possibilities required free will and enable the B-theorist to reject fatalism. They use the example that the truth values of the statements “I will go to the Philippines on December 15, 1993” and “I will not go to the Philippines on December 15, 1993,” either of which is uttered on October 5, 1993, cannot be determined until December 15, 1993 when I choose to either go to the Philippines or stay home. This later decision fixes which tenseless fact exists eternally3 (Smith and Oaklander 128-30). Here, Smith and Oaklander avoid fatalism by delaying the use of the law of the excluded middle to when the decision is made instead of before the decision, like Taylor, and positing that whichever statement is true exists outside of time. They claim that the law of the excluded middle “necessitates that one of a pair of contradictory statements is true, but it does not imply that either ‘P’ is necessarily true or ‘not-P’ is necessarily true” (Smith and Oaklander 128). Since the existence of the statement is outside of time, there should be no issues with our choices being set before we deliberate and make them, allowing for free will. Therefore, the B-theorist can have free will.

Yet, Taylor suggests that altering the law of excluded middle to allow events to be possible does not refute his argument. He says adding possible to the dichotomy of true and false is an arbitrary move that makes no difference and can also complicate other laws of logic like contradiction. Furthermore, Taylor claims that allowing the truth value of an event to be determined later gives time “power to render true or false certain propositions which were hitherto neither, and this an ‘efficacy’ of sorts” (Taylor 65). Smith and Oaklander did not include the passage of time in their argument; they employed the later than tenseless relation to prove free will. Similarly, Taylor uses the tenseless earlier than relation to prove fatalism. So, Taylor’s criticism that Smith and Oaklander’s view gives time efficacy does not hold because they do not propose the passage of time. Taylor cannot assume there is any directional asymmetry that allows time to determine the truth values of an event; there are only earlier than, simultaneous with, and later than relations. Furthermore, the truth value is determined by the decision-maker at the later time not time itself, so time does not have any active role in the eternal3 truth value of the choice. Therefore, Taylor’s criticism does not force the B-theorist to be a fatalist.

Despite Taylor’s failure to disprove Smith and Oaklander’s argument for free will and prove fatalism, Smith and Oaklander’s view faces three more objections. First, Smith and Oaklander fall into the same trap as Taylor of stipulation by defining eternal3 in such a way for something to exist eternally outside of time but be affected by events in time. They thought by establishing a truth value later when a choice was made but having that choice exist outside of time would avoid the problem of a choice being set before it occurred entailing fatalism. The decision to have the existence of the truth value outside of time is done to avoid saying that at the moment an action was made the action became eternal1 as it does not make sense for something to start existing eternally1. By devising eternal3 to be outside of time but contain time in it, Smith and Oaklander created a version of eternal that by default allows for free will yet does not demonstrate how these alternative possibilities are accounted for.

The idea that something is eternal3 if it exists outside of time and contains time seems mysterious. It is unclear as to how exactly the how the inside and outside of time parts are related. Since entities exist outside of time, we do not have any way to describe this existence in the way we understand existence temporally. While this existence is outside of time, it is somewhere else. Even though the problem of fatalism is described as events being set before they occur, the lack of time in eternal3 existence does imply that we have alternative possibilities. The problem of events being set is still present because the events are set somewhere. Even though they are set in some place outside of time, we have no way of knowing whether or not this truly removes fatalism as a possibility. There might be some kind of fatalism in space with a relation to time. Also, the use of the later than relation to give truth value to an action does not seem to give alternate possibilities.

At the particular moment later than one’s utterance is made true or false by a choice, the deliberation and conscious thought are missing. It seems that we directly go from the statement to its truth skipping everything in between. Since there is no account for this in-between as the B-theorist denies the passage of time and only accepts relations, we cannot guarantee that there is free will. If we broke down the events later than the utterance but earlier than the action, this might help account for the alternative possibilities. However, it seems like we must consciously be planning our decisions beforehand and waiting till the particular moment when their truth value will be revealed to us. It may be possible regardless of these in-between steps that the final outcome was always going to be the same, perhaps from this outside of time eternal3 existence. In this case, eternal3 is no better than eternal1 because the truth of an action is revealed to us at the time it occurs and we have no way of determining whether it came our own free will or was fated to happen. If eternal3 is no different than eternal1, then the B-theorist might as well accept fatalism. Smith and Oaklander may have difficulty defending their view against these objections as they must be able to describe what it means for something to exist outside of time but contain time in it and have its truth value to be determined in time.

However, I propose an eternal4 that employs the simultaneous with relation and allows an entity to exist in time, providing for free will. When an action or choice is made its truth value is simultaneously assigned as well. At this moment, the choice has a place on the timeline or is related to other occurrences by the earlier than, simultaneous with, and later than relations. So, the event exists in its particular place and relationally to all other events. We can say the event exists tenselessly in time solely in the sense that it has relations with other points in time. Since the choice is not set before it occurs and exists temporally, we can allow for free will.

However, this definition may still be stipulative because it ignores what is earlier than the action and assumes to some degree that there must be alternative possibilities before the choice is made. With regards to Taylor, it does not seem that eternal4 violates any of his presuppositions. For the law of the excluded middle, the truth value of an action is simultaneously determined with the action so there is no efficacy of the passage of time involved in determining the truth value as there is no time passing. As for the necessary conditions, sufficient conditions, and occurrence of an act, they seem all unaffected by eternal4.

Most of the work done to try to prove that fatalism is false is focused around the meaning of eternal. Smith and Oaklander provided three definitions of eternal and attempted to demonstrate how one of them could allow for free will. I also came up with my own version of eternal to provide for free will. While eternal4 may enable the B-theorist to have free will, the fatalism and free will debate comes down to one’s interpretation of eternal. Those that accept eternal3 may believe that fatalism is false. Traditionally, our most intuitive view of eternal has been eternal1 or existing throughout all time, which forces the B-theorist to be a fatalist. Regardless of whether we argue for or against fatalism, we must settle on a particular definition of eternal. The problem is that we do not know which interpretation is correct and many of the definitions are stipulative. Even if we come up with a non-stipulative definition of eternal that allows for free will, some may still not accept it. Therefore, the debate of whether fatalism is true or not is contingent on the meaning of eternal, and since eternal can mean something different to everyone, we cannot say with certainty whether the B-theorist must be a fatalist or can have free will.