

Time, Free Will, and Responsibility

(Abstract)

This talk asks what happens to moral responsibility if we live in a world where our best ontological picture of time strongly suggests that there is no free will in either the libertarian or compatibilist sense. My proposed answer to this question will have four main parts.

First, I argue that, based off our best current understanding of the physical world, the B-theoretic block universe is the most viable metaphysical picture of time available (see Maudlin 2007 or Minkowski 1908). The B-theoretic block universe present our world as a four-dimensional space-time block, wherein all moments of time are ontological on par and thus, at the level of existence, there is no difference between the past, present, and future.

Second, I maintain that the B-theoretic block universe strongly suggests fatalism and that this means that it is not compatible with a world where free will genuinely exists at the ontological level in either the libertarian or compatibilist sense. The fatalist views the future as we all view the past. What this means is that according to the fatalist the future is not in our control and there is nothing that we can do to change any part or moment of the future. The metaphysical basis of fatalism is often accompanied by a certain outlook surrounding the lives and endeavours of humans. This outlook is one of resignation in the face of an impending and unchangeable future that is simply going to come irrevocably marching into our lives whether we like it or not, imposing its moments on our existence without taking any heed of our input. While there have been some, such as Taylor (1962), who have embraced fatalism, most theorists have actively sought to avoid fatalism. A view that leads to the conclusion that what will be will be and we have no control over the future, arguably does not provide much motivation to get excited about our goals, invest in our projects, or put effort into our existence.

Third, I suggest that, insofar as the B-theoretic block universe leads to fatalism and rules out free will, it also precludes any justifiable conception of genuine moral responsibility. While I focus on reason-responsiveness views of moral responsibility (see Fischer and Ravizza 1998 or Sartorio 2016), I think my analysis can be extended to other accounts of the criteria for moral responsibility. Reasons-responsiveness views of moral responsibility emphasize the agent's ability to respond and be sensitive to the various rational considerations that are relevant to their possible actions. In short, my proposal is that the connection between fatalism and reason-responsiveness goes as follows:

- (i) An agent can be held morally responsible for an action A if and only if their behaviour would not be the same no matter what reasons they have to perform or not perform A.
- (ii) If fatalism is true, then the past is to be viewed at the metaphysical level in the same way as the future. We are not able to change our past actions no matter what reasons we have to alter our past actions. This would mean that, according to fatalism, we are not able to change our future actions no matter what reasons we have to change our future actions.

- (iii) From (i) and (ii), if fatalism is true, an individual cannot be held responsible for their actions.

Fourth, I conclude by arguing that even if we live in a fatalistic B-theoretic block universe where there is neither free will nor moral responsibility at the metaphysical level, all is not lost. One may understandably be slightly worried about the general mindset that seems to follow from the chain of events that results from the B-theoretic block's connection to fatalism. For instance, they might ask:

- ❖ Would not such a world form a bleak picture wherein agents purely focus on their own interests, taking no heed of others or the consequences of their actions?
- ❖ Why would anyone try to impact the future or put any real effort into the lives?
- ❖ Should we give up on attempting to be moral and holding ourselves to any standards?

In response to the above sorts of questions, I want to suggest that the fatalist mindset of resignation and surrender in the face of a certain fate can be avoided by the B-theoretic block universe theorist. Tackling this mindset would help to alleviate the primary reason why theorists have sought to evade the conclusion that the B-theoretic block universe is committed to fatalism. Towards this end, I think the best approach to rid fatalism of the association with a mindset of resignation and surrender emphasizes our epistemological limits. I conclude by applying this approach to both free will and moral responsibility in a fatalistic B-theoretic block universe. When it comes to free will, I will propose that the appropriate response to fatalism is not one of defeat but rather one of hope and effort in face of the unknown. This approach is motivated by the idea that the most rational way to respond to a future that is set yet unknowable is to approach it with as much heart as we can muster. If what will be will be and yet we do not know what will be, does it not make the most sense to always try to act in a way that sets what will be up for the best possible outcome? Granted, both our reaction to fatalism and what will be would be regardless of our will. Nevertheless, seeing as we do not know what will be, from our limited perspective it seems better to psychologically attempt to throw ourselves into rather than recoil from the inevitable. In connection to moral responsibility, I will bring everything together by contending that a world where there is no genuine moral responsibility recommends a justice system based on deterrence and understanding rather than one based on punishment and retribution.

References

- Fischer, J.M. & M. Ravizza. (1998). *Responsibility and Control: A Theory of Moral Responsibility*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Sartorio, C. (2016). *Causation and Free Will*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Taylor, R. "Fatalism". (1962). *Philosophical Review*. 71(1), 56-66.
- Maudlin, T. (2007). *The Metaphysics within Physics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Minkowski, H. (1908). Space and Time. In M. Saha (Trans.). *The Principle of Relativity* (37-91). London: Methuen and Company (1923).