

Christianity love must take particular care to disguise herself.<sup>5</sup> As it is it requires all Mathilde's ceremonial extravagance with Julien's severed head and candle-lit cave to restore a proper sense of the absurd, but nothing comes to our aid to reanimate the vanished perspectives of a progressive view.

<sup>5</sup>Goethe's suggestion that the women of *Scarlet and Black* are too romantic is very reasonable. Nevertheless the circumstances of Henrietta Wentworth's death following the execution of the Duke of Monmouth establish at least one precedent for the death of Madame de R  nal. They both left several children. Mathilde is difficult to take quite seriously. She has several of the qualities of Sheridan's Lydia Languish who not only amused herself with risqu   books from the Bath circulating library but was determined to lose her fortune in a romantic elopement.

# Professor Geach and the future

by Patrick McGrath

In his article on the future in the May issue of *Blackfriars* Professor Geach argues at some length against the thesis (which I will henceforth call fatalism) that the future is definite and determinate. I am just as firmly convinced as Professor Geach that fatalism is incorrect, but I am not at all sure that the reasons which he puts forward against this theory are sufficient to refute it. Geach's main argument against fatalism appears to be contained in the following passages:

The simple fact to which I want to draw your attention is the fact that not everything that was going to happen eventually did happen. Human agency often averts impending disasters. . . . What is prevented was going to happen, but didn't happen; the preventive action changes what is going to happen, changes the future . . . (Fatalism asserts) that if it is true at some later time that Johnny will die of polio, then nobody ever was able at some earlier time to bring it about Johnny was not going to die of polio. And this of course we do not believe: Johnny could have been preserved by a suitable injection, but his foolish parents neglected the precaution.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup>P. T. Geach 'The Future' in *New Blackfriars*, vol. 54, number 636 (May, 1973), pp. 209, 211.

However, the simple fact to which Geach draws our attention is not as simple as it looks. 'Not everything that was going to happen eventually did happen' may be interpreted in a number of different ways. It could mean:

- (a) Not everything that was planned would happen, e.g. the assassination of Hitler, eventually did happen.
- (b) Not everything that would have happened if some human agent or agents hadn't intervened, e.g. the death in solitary exile of Alexander Selkirk, actually happened.
- (c) Not everything that was fated to happen did happen.

Only (c) is incompatible with fatalism and since it does not express a genuine fact unless fatalism is false, it cannot be used to refute it without begging the question. In any event (c) as it stands would appear to be self-contradictory, for if something didn't happen, it cannot have been fated to happen. To avoid the contradiction (c) would have to be reworded as 'Not everything is fated to happen' and this cannot be established by simply pointing to the fact that human plans sometimes go astray or that certain events would have occurred had not human agents intervened.

The statement 'What is prevented was going to happen, but didn't happen' is something which a fatalist can accept without any inconsistency. If I snatch a child from the path of an oncoming car, I prevent him being killed. But this doesn't mean that I have 'changed the future' and thereby shown fatalism to be false. A fatalist would claim that it was always fated that the child would be saved, for it was always fated that I would rush out and save it. Even if fatalism is false, you cannot change the future in the sense of preventing a future event from happening. The future is composed of what will happen, just as the past is composed of what has happened. Hence, an event which is prevented from happening is not a future event. It is, if you wish, a 'hypothetically future' event, viz. an event which would have occurred if someone hadn't stepped in to prevent it. But fatalism can admit such events without inconsistency. The assertion 'The child would have been killed had I not snatched it from the road' may still be true even if it was fated that I would snatch it and it would thereby be saved. Nor will the fatalist have any difficulty in agreeing that Johnny would have been saved from polio had he been given a suitable injection. He will, however, argue that since Johnny wasn't given the injection, it was always fated that he wouldn't be given it and therefore it was not within anyone's power to give it to him. For the fatalist the impossibility arises from the (always fated) fact, not the fact from the impossibility. Admittedly this does not deprive fatalism of its paradoxical character, but it does, I think, show that it is not an absurd doctrine which may be dismissed out of hand.

Professor Geach seems to argue that if there are causal links be-

tween human behaviour and future events, then human behaviour can influence the future and this shows fatalism to be false. But the fatalist can reply that the future event was fated to happen because the act with which it is causally connected was also fated. There is no more difficulty to the fatalist in admitting causal links between human activities and future events than there is in admitting such links between the activities of non-human agents and future events since all are equally determined. Similarly the fatalist does not have to subscribe to the thesis that all human action is futile if the future is already determined. According to Cicero the following argument, known to antiquity as the 'idle argument', was put forward to show that fatalism implies quietism:

'If it is fated for you to recover from this illness, you will recover whether you call in a doctor or do not; and either your recovery or your non-recovery is fated; therefore there is no point in calling in a doctor.'<sup>2</sup>

The Stoic logician, Chrysippus, Cicero tells us, replied to this argument as follows:

'There exist in actuality two classes of facts, simple and complex. An instance of a simple fact is 'Socrates will die at a given date'; in this case, whether he does some action or does not do it, the day of his death has been determined. But if it is fated that "Laius will have a son Oedipus" it will not be possible for the words "whether Laius mates with a woman or does not" to be added, for the matter is complex and 'condestinate"—he gives that name to it because he thinks it is fated both that Laius will lie with a wife and that he will beget Oedipus by her; in the same way as, supposing it were said that "Milo will wrestle at Olympia" and somebody replied "If so he will wrestle whether he has an opponent or not", he would be wrong; for "will wrestle" is a complex statement, because there can be no wrestling without an opponent. Therefore all captious arguments of that sort can be refuted in the same way. "You will recover whether you call in a doctor or do not" is captious, for calling in a doctor is just as much fated as recovering.'<sup>3</sup>

Chrysippus seems to have skated too lightly here over the distinction between logical impossibility and mere physical impossibility. It is logically impossible for Milo to wrestle at Olympia unless he has an opponent, so the assertion 'Milo will wrestle at Olympia whether he has an opponent or not' is incoherent. But it is not logically impossible (though it may have appeared so to Chrysippus) for Laius to have a son Oedipus even if he never mates with a woman, nor is it logically impossible for a patient to recover without calling the doctor.

<sup>2</sup>*De Fato*, (translated H. Rackham), London, 1942, p. 225.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 225-6.

The statements 'Laius will have a son Oedipus whether he mates with a woman or not' and 'You will recover whether you call the doctor or not' may be false, but they are not logically incoherent, for whereas the connection between Milo wrestling and having an opponent is logical, the connection between Laius mating and having a son and the connection between recovering from illness and calling the doctor is causal. Nevertheless, Chrysippus's point is, in essence, I believe, correct. If fatalism does not imply that there are no causal links between human actions and future events, then it does not imply that human behaviour is futile. The fact that you are fated to recover does not imply that your recovery is causally independent of your previous behaviour. It may be that you are fated to recover only because you are also fated to call the doctor.

I am inclined to believe that there is no conclusive argument against fatalism. One may indeed argue, as Geach does, that however convinced you are of the truth of fatalism as a philosophical theory, it is impossible to be a fatalist in practice, for when things go wrong, you will inevitably blame yourself or others for not doing what ought to have been done; and this makes no sense if human behaviour is determined. But I doubt if a fatalist would be particularly impressed by this. He would almost certainly reply that belief in the freedom of the will is a deep-seated and almost universal human delusion to which one inevitably succumbs in moments of stress, but that this has no bearing on the theoretical issue. The best that philosophy can do in the face of this is to argue that as there is no good reason for thinking that fatalism is true or that our awareness of being free is a delusion, belief in fatalism is irrational. But even this is not such an easy matter to establish, since there are in fact some formidable arguments in favour of determinism, and it is far from clear that all of these—even the ones which come from antiquity—have ever been satisfactorily answered. This is effectively illustrated by the second part of Geach's article where he wrestles with the well-known difficulty of reconciling divine omniscience and human freedom.

The difficulty may be stated briefly as follows: If God is omniscient, he knows every action we will perform for the rest of our lives. But this means that the course of our lives is already laid out in advance. For it we had the power to refrain from doing what God already knows we will do, then we would have the power to make false what God knows to be true; and this is clearly contradictory. Each of us, therefore, as explained by the young man who said 'Damn', is

a being who moves  
in determinate grooves;  
in short not a bus, but a tram.

Of course this provides an argument in favour of fatalism only if one already accepts that there exists an omniscient God. But this is small

comfort for Christians, the vast majority of whom believe, like Professor Geach, that since a being who is not omniscient is neither infinite nor unchanging, he is not worthy to be called God.

Geach endeavours to meet this difficulty by insisting, first of all, that God cannot see the future. This is so not because there are limits to God's knowledge, but because the idea of seeing the future makes no sense. One can only see what is present and actual. Seeing the future would involve seeing events which are simultaneously present and future and actual and potential; and this is obviously nonsense. This argument is, I believe, unassailable if past, present and future are objective features of the universe. But suppose one were to adopt the 'block universe' theory which asserts that events do not happen but permanently exist and we merely come across them, so that past, present and future are purely subjective features of our experience. Would it not then make sense to speak of God seeing the whole sweep of time after the manner described by Boethius and Aquinas? I am not in the least tempted to adopt the block universe theory, for it would seem to render impossible any intelligible account of human life and experience. But from the fact that a theory is false, it does not follow that it is logically impossible and unless the block universe theory is logically incoherent, one can hardly rule out the idea of God seeing the future on the grounds that it makes no sense.

However, this question need not detain us, for even if God does not see the future, it may be that he knows the future; and this leaves the difficulty of reconciling divine foreknowledge with human freedom as acute as ever. Geach's position on this point appears to be that God has a knowledge of the future based on his absolute control over future events, but because man can influence his own destiny, this knowledge is incomplete. This clearly leaves room for free will, but does it do so at the expense of jettisoning the divine omniscience? Geach thinks not:

'I may have left you with an uncomfortable feeling that I deny God's omniscience. I do say that God doesn't know the way things definitely will turn out, but only because there is no such thing to be known: God is no more ignorant than in not knowing a rational value for or the square root of 2'.<sup>4</sup>

'God does not know the way things definitely will turn out' presumably means 'God does not know the way free human actions or events controlled by these actions are determined to turn out'. This assertion is, of course, tautologously true, but not surprisingly, being a tautology, it doesn't really get us very far. The question remains: Does God know how such actions and events *will* turn out? If he does not, it is hard to see how he can properly be called omniscient; if he does, then isn't the future fixed and determined?

<sup>4</sup>'The Future', p. 217.

However, it is possible that I have not properly interpreted Geach on this point. He may be asserting that God doesn't know how the future will turn out because one can know only what is true and no assertion about future free actions or their consequences is either true or false. This is the position adopted by the fourteenth century Jewish philosopher, Gersonides, and it is perhaps the most ingenious solution to the problem of divine foreknowledge and human freedom ever devised. So even if it does not represent accurately Geach's view on the matter, it is still worth considering for its own sake.

Gersonides's solution is valid only if the following two propositions are true:

- (a) Statements about future free actions are not governed by the principle of excluded middle and so are neither true or false.
- (b) Divine omniscience is not incompatible with ignorance of future free actions.

Proposition (a) is one that has been a subject of contention amongst philosophers since Aristotle's time. There are a number of reasons for rejecting it, though I am not sure that any of these, or even all of them taken together, are sufficient to refute it. The first of these could be stated as follows: Proposition (a) implies that the truth values of propositions are subject to change since a proposition about a future free action is neither true nor false now but will become true or false later. But the idea that a proposition can have different truth values at different times is open to serious difficulty. Take the proposition 'John will learn to speak French next year', for example. According to Gersonides's theory this will become true next year if John in fact learns to speak French. But when *will* the proposition become true? Not at any particular moment of time, since in the ordinary course of events it would make no sense to say that John cannot speak French at one moment and can at the next. Well then does the proposition *gradually* become true? But this would mean that while John is learning the language, the proposition that he will learn it is partly true and partly indeterminate; and this seems absurd.

Secondly, those who try to reconcile divine foreknowledge and human freedom by denying the universal validity of a logical principle are making use of a procedure which, if extended to other areas, would lead to the total abdication of reason. For any argument can be rendered harmless by rejecting the universal validity of the logical principle which underlies it. If we are not prepared to tolerate this method of meeting a difficulty in other areas, why should we tolerate it here?

Thirdly, we do seem to be justified in asserting that we know that certain events will occur even though their occurrence depends on human decisions. For example, I know that the Derby will be run at Epsom next June, that a Presidential election will be held in the

United States in 1976, that Princess Anne will marry Lieutenant Phillips. All these events will result from decisions that have already been taken. But if assertions about them are known to be true and are therefore governed by the principle of excluded middle, it is difficult to see why the principle should not also apply to assertions about events resulting from decisions which have yet to be taken. A future event which is the result of a past decision is no more determined to happen than an event resulting from a future decision. So if the principle of excluded middle is applicable to some assertions about future free actions or their consequences, it should be applicable to all of them.

At any rate let us ignore these difficulties for the moment and turn to proposition (b). If we assume that assertions about future free actions are neither true nor false, will this enable us to reconcile divine foreknowledge and human freedom? Gersonides's claim is that to say that God is omniscient is to say that he knows everything that is true. But assertions about future free actions or their consequences are neither true nor false. Therefore, to say that God does not know what we are going to do before we do it is not to place any limitation on the divine knowledge. This does, I believe, get around the difficulty concerning the divine omniscience, but it does so at the expense of raising equally serious difficulties concerning other divine attributes. For if what Gersonides says is true, it follows that God is constantly acquiring new knowledge and this means that he is neither infinite nor unchanging. There is little point in preserving God's omniscience by sacrificing the claim that he is both infinite and immutable, since the only reason why the claim that God is omniscient is thought to be important is that to abandon it is to render God both finite and changeable.

However, Geach claims that the fact that God acquires new knowledge does not mean that he is subject to change.

'We may have to say different things about an object at different times because some *other* object changes. Even of numbers, which are timeless, we have to assert different things at different times: "twelve is the number of the Apostles" ceased to be true when Judas cast himself away, and then was true again when St. Matthias was co-opted—but the number 12 cannot be a subject of change, only Judas and St. Matthias were so. So in our case: *We* have to say different things at different times about God's knowledge concerning Hitler, not because God's mind changes but because Hitler changed'.<sup>5</sup>

I'm afraid I find this argument totally unconvincing. If God does not have knowledge of future free actions, it means that he is constantly acquiring new knowledge; and such a being cannot be either infinite

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, 214.

or unchanging. Geach's general principle is, of course, correct. The fact that A acquires a new relationship with B does not imply that A has changed, for the change in relationship may be fully accounted for by a change in B. Thus 'A is larger than B' may cease to be true, not because A has diminished in size, but because B has increased. But 'A does not know that p' cannot cease to be true without a change occurring in A. This point would appear to be so obvious as not to be worth arguing, since the acquiring of knowledge is clearly something that happens in the knower rather than in what is known—though it may be brought about by a change in what is known. But if an argument is required, one may easily be provided. Suppose a child learns for the first time that  $4 \times 3 = 12$ . This means that the child acquires a new relationship with the number 12, since he now knows something about it which he did not know before. But a change in the relationship between A and B can occur only if there is a change in either A or B or both. Now the number 12, as Geach points out, is not subject to change. Therefore, the change must have occurred in the child. It seems clear that the same must be true of every instance of learning. No doubt God does not learn in the same way as we do. But if he lacks knowledge of future free actions, he must make good that lack by acquiring a knowledge of them when they occur; otherwise he is not omniscient. And this means that he is not immutable and therefore not infinite.

Is there any way then of reconciling God's omniscience (or immutability) and human freedom? On a matter as difficult as this one hesitates to put forward a definite opinion, but the more I have reflected on this problem the more certain it has appeared to me that the dilemma it poses is insoluble. If God knows everything that will happen, there is no room for free will. If he does not, he cannot be infinite and unchanging. Unless I am wrong about this, a great deal of hard thinking on the character of the divine attributes is required from theologians, philosophers and scripture scholars. But perhaps this is required in any case.