

Graduate Seminar: Fatalism and the Logic of Unconditionals

Johns Hopkins University, Fall 2017

Course Information

Instructor	Justin Bledin Assistant Professor Philosophy Department Gilman 206 jbledin@jhu.edu
Office Hours	by appt only
Class Code	AS.150.625
Class Time	F 10:00am-12:00pm
Class Location	Gilman 288

Course Description

This seminar centers on a variant of the classic “Idle Argument” for fatalism (Cicero’s *De Fato* from 44BC, Dummett 1964, Stalnaker 1975) involving “unconditionals” with interrogative wh-adjuncts. The setting is London during WWII just as sirens sound warning of an approaching air raid. As you deliberate about whether to go take shelter, the Fatalist reasons as follows:

- (1) If you are going to be killed in the air raid, then you are better off staying where you are than taking precautions. (...after all, you are going to be killed whether or not you take precautions.)
- (2) If you aren’t going to be killed in the air raid, then you are better off staying where you are than taking precautions. (...after all, you aren’t going to be killed even if you neglect to take precautions.)
- (3) So, whether or not you are going to be killed, you are better off staying where you are than taking precautions.
- (4) So look, you are better off staying where you are than taking precautions.

Not surprisingly, you sense something amiss with this argument, and so you set off towards the air-raid shelter. But why? What exactly is wrong with the Fatalist’s argument? And what explains its illusion of force? Why on earth would anybody take it seriously? In this seminar, we consider various ways to resist the fatalistic conclusion and try to diagnosis the problem with the argument. This might seem like a rather narrow investigation. But it will lead us into the large literatures on the semantics of deontic modals, *if*-conditionals, and unconditionals, the use of decision-theoretic methods in formal semantic theorizing, and the logic and semantics of questions.

Requirements

The only requirement for this seminar is a less than 30 page double-spaced course-related paper. If you are taking the course to fill the logic requirement, then this paper must have a strong technical component.