

The Future

by P. T. Geach

Years ago, there was a popular song whose refrain went thus:

Che sarà, sarà,
Whatever will be, will be,
The future's not ours to see,
Che sarà, sarà.

The first line of this refrain is the motto of the noble house to which Bertrand Russell belonged; it serves to express a view of time that has been set forth by Russell in many of his writings, but the view is one widely held long before Russell lived and now held by many people independently of him. We should not be misled by the tautological appearance of the sentence 'Whatever will be, will be'; in the song it is a way of putting forward a positive thesis, which may fairly be called a philosophical thesis, even though people who hold it are often little practised in systematic philosophical reflection. We may call it the thesis that there is a definite or determinate future. A book may lie open at one page, but it has a definite text from first page to last, irrespective of this; many people think in this way of the book of human history.

We should distinguish between the definiteness or determinacy of the future and its being causally determined by the present and past. If there are causes that now exist or have already existed from which the future can issue only in one way, then the future is clearly determinate; but the converse does not hold. The metaphor of the book may help us again; even if the text of later pages is not determined by the text of earlier pages, there may nevertheless be a completely fixed text on those pages which we have not yet turned over. The future may be held to be fixed and definite without being held to be causally determined in advance; but in so far as the future is held not to be fixed and definite, it will certainly not be causally determined either.

If there is a fixed order of words in the whole book, this will be knowable, inspectable; but the song goes on to say 'The future's not ours to see'. And this sentence too expresses a thesis commonly held about the future. The emphasis to be understood is 'The future's not *ours* to see': though in principle observable, it is not to be observed by us men. Believers in God have held that the vision of the future is God's prerogative, and we men must not seek after such vision, though God may graciously reveal to us what he sees. Unbelievers have held that our failure to see the future is a contingent and possibly removable limitation. There the future is stretched out before us, as the Promised Land lay before Moses on Mount Pisgah,

but it is normally covered by a thick curtain of mist through which we cannot see. But God can see the whole view and reveal what he sees; or again, there may be a 'gap in the curtain' (to cite the title of a good novel by John Buchan based on this idea of the future) and through this gap we may get a fragmentary vision of what is normally hidden.

As I have said, the views expressed in the song are commonplace; like many commonplaces, I shall maintain, they are false. The idea of a determinate future is a dangerous piece of mythology, and it conflicts with things that we really know perfectly well. It is true in a sense that the future's not ours to see—but not in the sense that I am sure the author of the lyric intended. The truth is that the future is not for *anybody* to see; 'seeing the future' is a self-contradictory notion. I shall begin by discussing the reasons that make me reject the idea of a determinate future, and then consider what we should say about knowledge of the future by God or man.

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; in the Bible stories of the Ninevites and of King Hezekiah, prayer and repentance are said to avert even a doom prophetically foretold. Again, a foolish or idle person was going to make a journey but neglected his opportunity and the journey became impossible. The phrase 'became impossible' is significant; obviously logical possibilities cannot come to be or pass away, so we must be thinking of some other sort of possibility bound up with the passage of time.

When we say that some disaster was avoided or prevented, or when the drunken suitor, Hippokleides, in Herodotus is said to have danced away his marriage, which the bride's father indignantly called off, we are not speaking of a relation between a person and an event. The disaster, or the marriage, is in Chesterton's phrase absent from the Nature of Things. We may speak of a properly transitive verb as a verb that links two noun-phrases to signify some relation between real objects. Let us then contrast the verbs 'to avoid', 'to prevent', 'to dance away', 'to call off', with the verbs 'to create', 'to produce', or again 'to destroy'. We might have some doubts about the proper transitivity both of 'to produce' and of 'to destroy', for production is not an action upon the thing produced because the thing isn't there until the productive process is finished, and destruction on the other hand isn't finished until the thing destroyed is there no longer. This difficulty is even greater about the verb 'to create' in the theological sense, for the Creator was not acting upon *anything* that existed before the creation. Such considerations indeed led to perplexities in medieval philosophy as to whether there could be actual relations, *relationes reales*, between Creator and creature. I cannot now enter into the logic and metaphysics of relations (a paper on the subject appears in my book *Logic Matters*); it is enough

to say that after the creation or production of a thing the agent and recipient of the action co-existed, as did the destroying agent and the thing destroyed at the beginning of the destructive process, and thus we may speak in both cases of an actual relation. The position is quite different when a disaster is prevented or a marriage called off; this signifies not just that something conceived as the object of action *at some time* does not exist along with the agent, but that the event does not occur *at all*, is excluded from the Universe.

The very sentence I have just used still expresses the false picture I want to remove from your minds: it is as though events waited their chance to appear on the stage of history but some of them were *shut out*. Obviously we cannot take this seriously: an actor can be distinguished from his appearance on the stage but we cannot distinguish between an event on the one hand and the occurrence or emergence or appearance or taking place of the event on the other hand. Another picture deep-rooted in human thought is the picture of abortion, involved in such phrases as 'an abortive attempt', 'an attempt that miscarried'. (There are similar phrases in other languages.) Let us dwell upon this picture a little—it may help us to reduce latent nonsense in our thinking to patent nonsense. A baby that is not yet born may or may not be a human being, so far as mere logic goes, but it is certainly to be treated as logically entitled to a proper name if we choose to identify it in this way—that is a logical right it shares with shoes and ships and sticks of wax and cabbages and kings. We may picture events similarly as preexisting in the womb of Fate—and then some come to birth, others are aborted. But this really is nonsense. An event just is not to be distinguished, as a baby is, from its coming to the birth; and an event that never comes to the birth certainly has no right to the logical dignity of having a proper name conferred on it.

If the pilot's prompt action prevented the worst air disaster of the twentieth century, this does not mean some accident, in the actual world or in some possible world, that *is* the worst air disaster of the twentieth century; we must no more be deceived by the surface grammar of what is said than we infer from the statement 'the average English father has $2\frac{1}{2}$ children' that there is some English father who has $2\frac{1}{2}$ children. What class of accidents would the accident that was avoided be the worst member of? It surely would not be the worst air disaster that could possibly have happened in our century, and since it never happened it wasn't the worst actual air disaster either. As with the 'average English father' sentence, we need to preserve our sense of reality and turn the sentence around to show its real force: there is some number that is the biggest number of people who were killed in any (actual) air crash of the twentieth century, but more than that number were on that plane and were going to be killed, only the pilot's prompt action stopped their being killed.

Then what is prevented, if it makes no sense to think of some individual entity as being aborted? What is prevented is *that* so-and-so should happen when it *was going* to happen. In other words, logically the object of preventing should be expressed in a *clause* not with a noun-like expression; in Latin, a language less fond of abstract noun phrases than English is, you get just this construction for preventing—‘impedivit quominus’ or ‘effecit ne’ followed by a clause with the verb in the subjunctive. (And don’t ask me what ‘so-and-so’ stands for when I say ‘What is prevented is *that* so-and-so should happen’. If the question were allowed to be raised, we’d be back with the absurd picture of something happening *to* an event—namely, that it happens! In fact, the clause ‘that so-and-so should happen’ just goes proxy for a more definite narrative proposition—e.g. that 135 people were going to crash and be killed but the pilot’s prompt action prevented its being so that they should crash and be killed.)

So what is prevented was going to happen, but didn’t happen: the preventive action changes what is going to happen, changes the future. Verbally ‘What’s done is done’ and ‘Whatever will be will be’ sound like two tautologies; but as they would most likely be meant neither is a tautology, and one is true, the other false. Let us take ‘What’s done is done’ first: we are not saying—to use Aquinas’s example—just that if a girl has lost her virginity then she has lost her virginity, but that if it is true at some earlier time that she has lost her virginity then nobody will be able at any later time to bring it about that she has not lost it—according to Aquinas, and I’m sure he’s right, not even God can do anything like that. Now to get the corresponding interpretation of ‘Whatever will be, will be’ we must switch past and future tenses and the words ‘earlier’ and ‘later’, and then we come up with a statement like this: 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.

St Paul says in the Epistle to the Romans that what people really think about right and wrong comes out when they get into arguments with one man accusing and the other excusing himself: the premises we may then notice them appealing to may be wildly inconsistent with moral theories that they have formed or picked up, and St Paul teaches that this is a matter of the Divine Law written in people’s hearts. I think this goes for logical laws as well as for moral laws. Theoretically, a man may be a fatalist and hold that he is as unable to change the future as to change the past. But the very next time he blames his neighbour for something that has gone wrong through the neighbour’s bungling, he will certainly not hear the excuse that the misfortune was going to happen anyhow. ‘Of course it was going to happen, you blithering fool!’ he will say. ‘You could see it was going

to happen. Why didn't you stop it?' And at once his fatalism has broken down.

I am well aware that some people will have been wanting to protest against the confusion between two senses of 'what is going to happen': what is actually going to happen, and—well, what else? To make what is *actually* going to happen one side of the contrast is not much good; has 'actually' any more logical force than raising your voice or thumping the table? The supposed weaker sense of 'what is going to happen' might be explained as: what would happen if not prevented. This is not a merely vacuous expression—what would happen unless it didn't—for not everything that doesn't happen can be said to have been prevented. The comic effect of the sentence in the schoolboy's essay on 'The Uses of Pins'—'they save thousands of lives every year by not being swallowed'—arises because saving the people's lives in this year means preventing them from dying in this year, and prevention seems not to be here the point. But what is prevented? As I said before, what was going to happen: the comic effect is preserved in the paraphrase 'Thousands of people were going to die but their non-swallowing of pins prevented this'. But then we see that prevention *presupposes* the idea of what was—in a non-fatalistic sense—going to happen; so it is no use trying to explain this 'going to happen' in terms of prevention as what would have happened unless prevented.

Again, people appeal against me to the institution of betting: it's no good for a man to claim that on form his horse is going to win so he wants his money—it is part of the bet that the horse actually will win! I am not sure how to analyse the betting situation, and I cannot believe this part of our attitude towards the future is logically or philosophically important. But I might further answer the argument thus: 'On your view, a MacDonald who is seventh son of a seventh son and has the Sight might *see* the winning horse led in before the event; and in that case why shouldn't the bet be settled when *he's* told us what he sees—as against the rarity of reliable testimony about the future there is the inconvenience of waiting for ordinary eyewitness testimony?' It is clear that regardless of the MacDonald's alleged powers the bet binds nobody until the race has been run; even if there were a determinate result in advance and we had a man who saw it, we'd not go by what definitely will happen but only by what has happened.

I simply reject the idea of the determinate future. In practice we all know perfectly well that there are on the contrary alternative futures between which we have to choose; the will of man is in Churchill's phrase the hinge of fate—it turns on our will whether the door will open or be shut for ever (and it may be the door to Heaven or Hell). Time is often represented by a straight line. Such spatial pictures are very dangerous, because we may suppose that the case of drawing a diagram corresponds to a right to conceive some

temporal analogue—to think, e.g. of time running backwards or looping the loop. But if we are to use such a diagram, the time-line ought to branch towards the future. It would on the contrary be absurd for it to branch towards the past, as if different and incompatible past histories may already have happened to somebody! But each of several incompatible futures may lie before him.

At this point somebody will wish to appeal to God's omniscience. God is outside time, and he changelessly sees the whole order of events in time—therefore *sees* what definitely will happen, as opposed to the various things that in my sense are going to happen. I accept that God is omniscient and changeless, but I deny the consequences alleged to follow.

I agree that God is changeless in the sense that the Divine Nature excludes any succession of mental states. In our time some 'rethinking' of this doctrine has been favoured, so I will briefly say why I think this will not do. Only an unchanging God can transcend the world as its free cause and sovereign Lord; a God who was affected by what happened in the world would simply be one remarkable inhabitant of the changeable world, not the world's Creator. Anaxagoras already said that the *Nous*, the supreme Mind which set the world in order, was unmixed with the world and unaffected by the natural agents that Mind controls. But I do not like speaking of God as timeless, because this suggests that God is something like a number, which cannot—unless you go in for superstitions about lucky and unlucky numbers—be regarded as a causal agent at all. God is eternal: but this does not mean that it is nonsense to speak of his duration, but that he is God to everlasting and from everlasting, before the mountains were brought forth and the earth and the world were made.

The world, on the other hand, is really temporal and changeable: and this truth must be insisted upon as much as the changelessness and eternity of God. Time is so perplexing that we can understand philosophers' wishing to cut the knot by denying the reality of time; but I think the denial is vain, because however we may be deluded our delusions are *changing* delusions—delusions that could not all occur simultaneously in the mind—and thus there is real change in the world. Denial of the reality of time is moreover incompatible with Judaeo-Christian theism, because the contrast between the changing world and the unchanging Creator is an integral part of such theism. No wonder McTaggart, who subtly argued for the unreality of time, thought he had also disproved the existence of the God worshipped by Jews and Christians!

People tend to confuse themselves at this point by saying that the world may be timeless from God's point of view though changeable with time from our point of view. But this is just a muddle, a darkening of counsel. If God sees the world as it is, and the world is temporal and changing, then God must see the world as temporal

and changing. And if on the contrary I felt forced to the conclusion that the world was not really temporal and changing, that time and change are delusions of our minds, then I should conclude with McTaggart that the doctrine of a Creative and Providential God had also been overthrown.

I shall consider in a moment whether the knowledge God has of the world is suitably described in terms of *seeing*. But let us begin with one clear and simple point: what God knows is simply what is so. If we are justified in asserting anything, we are likewise justified in asserting that God knows it. This means that if we are speaking of changing realities, we shall have to assert of God successively what we could not assert of him simultaneously: in 1942 'God knows that Hitler is alive', in 1972 'God knows that Hitler is dead', and at no time at all 'God both knows that Hitler is alive and knows that Hitler is dead'—we can no more assert this than 'Hitler is alive and Hitler is dead'. The carrying out of these rules may seem to jeopardize the doctrine I insisted upon that God's mind doesn't change. But the danger is only apparent. This is an old story dating back to Plato's *Theaetetus*: 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.

An appeal to God's knowledge cannot remove a contradiction or make sense out of nonsense. If a proposition is self-contradictory, it is self-contradictory to say God knows that: if a question makes no sense, it makes no sense to say God knows the answer. If the notion of one definite future course of events is incoherent, as I have argued, we cannot make it coherent by appealing to the Divine Omniscience that sees the future.

Such appeals to the Divine Omniscience are sometimes even grossly incoherent. One reads theological speculations about how God sees the various behaviour of men in various hypothetical circumstances, with various allotments of grace, and on the basis of this decides the actual course of the world and the way to allot grace within it. Such speculations strike me as both profane—*quis fuit consiliarius eius?*—and absurd: what is merely hypothetical cannot be seen, there can be conditional decisions or decrees but not a conditional vision. But it seems to me—and so I feel bound to say: *magis amica veritas*—that there is an incoherence of the same kind in Aquinas's view of God's seeing from the high tower of his eternity the course of future events—seeing future events just as they actually

are in their presentness, *prout sunt in actu in sua praesentialitate*. Future events are not actual, but only potential; they are not present, and cannot be truly seen as present. The Boethian picture of the high tower is anyhow quite a wrong picture of the way events are ordered by Divine Providence, since it makes God into a mere spectator.

In Christian tradition there is another view of God's knowledge: one that compares his knowledge of the world to men's knowledge of their future free actions: *scientia Dei causa rerum*. We find this view in Aquinas side by side with the Boethian view, and I cannot see any way of bringing the two views together. On the present view God's knowledge of the future comes solely from, indeed consists in, his perfect control over the future; in Anaxagoras too, to mention him once more, we find this association of omniscience regarding the world with almighty control over it. This line of thought, as is well known, has been developed by theologians of the Thomist school but there are to my mind certain defects in their treatment. First, they have not abandoned the inconsistent Boethian view. Secondly—no doubt partly in consequence of the Boethian view—they have supposed that there exists, as determined by God's decrees, a unique and definite future. Thirdly, they have got into serious trouble about reconciling man's freedom with the unique future determined by God's almighty will.

God is almighty: God cannot be thwarted, or taken by surprise, or driven to improvisations, by the perverse misdeeds of his creatures. But this does not mean that creatures have not a real say in the future of the world. 'Is it not written in your law: I said, ye are Gods?' Only God is bound to win, and none the less if he announces some of his moves in advance. If I were playing chess against Bobby Fischer, he might very well announce in advance not only that he would beat me but that he would deliver mate with a certain pawn; and I am sure he would not need to invent new strategy to do this. God knows in advance all the possibilities and can do whatever he wills; so there is no doubt that he will win, and he can even tell us how.

We can have absolute confidence in the future just in so far as we have absolute confidence in God. The trust we put in the order of nature is represented in the Holy Scriptures as a trust in God's promises—the covenant with Noah after the Flood, the covenant of day and night, the Moon in heaven that witnesses to the perpetuity of Messiah's reign. The topic of induction is a very difficult one: some of my hearers may know of the profound difficulties raised but nowise solved by Professor Nelson Goodman in his book *Fact, Fiction and Forecast*. The question is: Given that we have certain standards of rationality, will it in fact lead us right to follow them? And I cannot see we have the least reason to believe or hope this, unless we regard our possession of these standards as an implicit promise from God.

Let me make a simple logical point. Consider the form of inference 'Most Ms are P, b is an M, therefore b is a P'. Obviously it is logically

guaranteed that of the possible reasonings of this pattern (assuming that we are concerned with finite classes of Ms) most will be sound. But this does not in any way logically guarantee that most of the reasonings we actually perform according to this pattern will come out with true conclusions from true premises. To believe *that* rationally we need to know that our standards of rational inference come from God and that he has implicitly promised that his ordering of the world will not confound our standards. But if God's existence is not a matter of faith but of certain knowledge, then perhaps we can know this.

The idea of an implicit promise is certainly problematic but it is one that we constantly use in human affairs: only moral philosophers, copying one another's books, suppose that a man hasn't promised unless he has said (in some language) the sacramental formula 'I promise'. There's a legend of an Oxford moral philosopher who carefully avoided using the formula, so that he could escape the heavy responsibility of having promised—he had merely expressed his intentions! Now our trust in our fellows is not and cannot be itself founded on induction. *Addiscentem oportet credere*: only by trusting our fellows can we accumulate a sufficient stock of information to make worthwhile inductions upon.

The idea that a single individual could perform inductions within his own private experience as a basis for rules about when to trust his fellows is simply ludicrous. Of course our fellows are *not* absolutely trustworthy: but God is. The difficulty is only to tell what we can count as his implicit promises to us; and to find this out we shall have to use the wits he has given us—it may not be obvious on the face of things. I have said more about this in my current course of Stanton Lectures at Cambridge. Here I will only say epigrammatically what I have there said at length: probability is the guide of life only because we know that *both* our standards of rational expectation *and* the ordering of events are from a God who is true and faithful and has all things under his control.

If the future is really under God's control but also really affected by our choice, this excludes certain forms of predestinarian doctrine, to be found in uncompromising and repellent form in Jonathan Edwards and to which, I fear, some Thomists would logically be committed. I have found in Aquinas himself an elegant counter-argument that the predestination of men to Heaven cannot be independent of men's choices. For suppose Adam had never fallen, as he was free not to fall: then even if some of his posterity had sinned, the world might not have been *so* sinful, and in particular many rapes, adulteries, incests, etc., from which offspring have come, would not have happened. Since a man's identity is constituted by his actual place in a genealogical tree—since it is nonsense to say the same man might have had different parents if things had gone otherwise—this means that in that less sinful world many people

who have in fact lived would never have lived. If predestination is unconditional in the way some have supposed, none of these people could go to Heaven, because in the world with Adam unfallen they wouldn't have been there to go to Heaven. Are they then all reprobate and damned? Such, says Aquinas mildly, is not the mind of the Church. So we must rather say that some people will in fact go to Heaven who would not have gone if Adam had not sinned, because they wouldn't have been there to go to Heaven. Obviously Adam doesn't figure essentially in this argument; many of us would not be here but for sins of the flesh that our ancestors might perfectly well have avoided. The argument would apply in particular to Our Lady, if we think a little about the genealogy of the House of Israel and the House of David as given in the Scriptures. As the old carol says

Had not that apple ever eaten been,
Never had Our Lady been Heaven's Queen.

A tough supralapsarian like Edwards, and perhaps some advocates of the physical premotion, might say that God arranges all those sexual irregularities by which the predestined are eventually to be born. But I do not see how this view can avoid making God the author of sin. This is not only repellent but logically incoherent: for then God would be the author of all the lies men tell, and then there could be no faith in the Revelation of a God who can neither deceive nor err: a position that Jonathan Edwards and any other professing Christian would have to reject.

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 I hold there is no such thing to be known: God is no more ignorant than in not knowing a rational value for π or the square root of 2. God has everything under control, he cannot be thwarted by us, and he will be faithful to his promises—not only to his natural, implicit promises but also to his revealed ones. He simply cannot fail to deliver and redeem Israel, for he can neither alter the *fait accompli* of having promised, nor break his word. That promise is as certain, Jeremiah says, as the covenant of day and night: it is even more certain than that the Sun will rise tomorrow, for who can tell but that tomorrow will be the day for which Israel prays every year in the Passover liturgy—the one day known to the Lord when it shall be neither day nor night?

In our superstitious times people increasingly fancy that the future can be known in extraordinary ways, independent of God's natural or revealed promises. Sometimes it is a matter of trusting to the supposed superhuman wisdom of machines: these inanimate artefacts, it is hoped, can be consulted on important matters like how many babies to allow to be born and when to start bombing our enemies. There was an article in *Encounter* about an all-purpose prediction machine (I forget whether it was supposed to be already in existence or was a gleam in someone's eye) mathematically

guaranteed to improve its performance steadily by way of feedback till it was pretty well infallible. Needless to say, mathematics can no more guarantee any such thing than mathematics can show the truth of astrology. And some astronomer claimed he had a machine that would predict the Sun's temperature for millions of years—nobody seems to have asked if it would predict it *right!*

I can call spirits from the vasty deep—
 Why, so can I, and so can any man,
 But will they come when you do call for them?

Another form of credulity relates to alleged *sight* of the future by some paranormal means. But *seeing* the future—seeing as actuality what exists only in the potentiality of Divine intentions thus far unrevealed and human intentions perhaps not even formed—can be nothing but a delusion. As F. H. Bradley said, 'If we dally with superstition, if we leave the honourable daylight . . . the Sun has gone back on the dial of humanity'. In the words the Douai translators used to translate the Deuteronomic prohibition on fortunetelling fooleries, we are otherwise instructed by the LORD our God.

Religion, Politics and the Catholic Working Class

by Patrick J. Doyle

Most studies of the British electorate agree that Catholics tend to support Labour. Indeed, Robert McKenzie and Allan Silver argue that Roman Catholics are the group least likely to vote Conservative.¹ However, with a few notable exceptions Catholics have not made a great contribution to Labour politics. This failure can be explained by a variety of factors, primarily the insistence by Church leaders in the past that, as a minority, Catholics ought to organize defensively to protect their own interests, particularly the schools. Hence the formation of the Catholic Federations as a response to the educational policies of the Campbell-Bannerman and Asquith Governments. Some Catholics in this period were also mesmerized by the chimera of a Catholic party similar to the German Centre Party, and it is highly significant that the Salford Diocesan Federation received

¹Robert McKenzie and Allan Silver, *Angels in Marble: Working-Class Conservatives in Urban England*, 1968, p. 100. See also: A. H. Birch, *Small Town Politics: A Study of Political Life in Glossop*, 1959, p. 87.