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## Patrick Todd, THE OPEN FUTURE: WHY FUTURE CONTINGENTS ARE ALL FALSE

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leap that has so recently been revealed. At the same time, the prospects surrounding artificial intelligence are not new. Any claims about the prospects of writing by nonhumans ought to include, in addition to reflections on primates and dolphins, a similar treatment of computers and artificial intelligence. At the very least, I hope to see further conversations on this topic going forward.

*The Open Future: Why Future Contingents Are All False*, by Patrick Todd. Oxford University Press, 2021. Pp. xi + 210. \$70.00 (hardcover).

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Will there be a sea battle tomorrow? Will I die in 2030 or 2080? Will there ever be outposts on Mars? For open future theorists, these “future contingents” are to be treated differently than propositions about the present and past—it’s a solid, immutable truth that there was a sea battle in October 1805 and that there have never been Martian outposts, but future contingents instead receive a special status, e.g. being “indeterminate” or lacking a truth-value entirely. In *The Open Future*, Todd argues that, “There will be a sea battle tomorrow” is false, and so is “There will not be a sea battle.” Nevertheless, unlike false propositions about the past and present, that truth-value may change; when tomorrow rolls around, precisely one of those statements will *become* true.

Todd sees the problem of future contingents as breaking into three sub-problems; to each sub-problem, Todd dedicates one part of his book. On the one hand there is a *grounding problem*: what could ground/explain the truth of future contingents? On the other hand, if we concede that future contingents aren’t true, we face the *logical problem* (what happens to the Law of Excluded Middle? what becomes of bivalence?) and *practical problems* (if it’s not true that tomorrow I will need to go to work, why bother going to bed early?). Todd believes the first problem motivates there being an open future; he then spends the rest of the book arguing that the logical and practical problems can be overcome.

Chapter 1 discusses the grounding problem. Todd accepts presentism, the thesis that only the present exists. He then argues that presentism leads to the future being open. Todd begins by discussing the supervenience argument for that claim: what is true should supervene on what exists; given presentism, nothing about what exists could be an



appropriate supervenience base for true future contingents; thus, there are no true future contingents. However, Todd does not believe this argument is sound. For Todd, it is unattractive for two reasons. First, given presentism, it leaves the past as open as the future—an intolerable consequence! Second, Todd has the intuition that even if *everything* was scrubbed from existence—where that would include the putative supervenience base for past truths—then we should nevertheless say that the past truths are still true. Destroy whatever you want, the Battle of Trafalgar will still have taken place in 1805!

With the supervenience argument found wanting, Todd runs a different argument for the future being open. He makes his first recourse to drawing analogies between temporal truths and truths from a different category, in this case truths about fiction. In fictions, facts are often left unfixed by the fiction (for instance, exactly how many hobbits live in the Shire in *The Lord of the Rings*?). In those cases, even God Himself could not know the answer for *there is no fact to know*. Todd says claims about such facts are all false: e.g., “There are 14,201 hobbits in the Shire” is false. And Todd says that future contingents are in the same boat: there is no fact about what happens in the future (and, since there is no fact, claims about such facts are false). Just like fictional truths, this is because those facts are (in some sense) metaphysically derivative rather than fundamental. Just as it would be absurd to say that there’s a fact as to how many hobbits there are given the absence of any proclamation from Tolkien, given the presentist’s commitment to the absence of the future, there are no future facts either. When we come to past facts, and why there can be past facts even given presentism, Todd says that he has no similar intuition about the nature of past truth. Indeed, as he has just claimed, past truths would remain no matter what, even if we scrubbed away everything from existence. Past truths, then, are not subject to the same sort of worries as future truths.

So, Todd puts a lot of burden on an intuition about how the world would be if everything was destroyed. But when we say “everything,” I worry that makes it a counterpossible intuition. Presentists routinely believe in things like brute states of affairs, facts about ersatz times, weird haecceities, etc., all playing a role in grounding past truths. So, when Todd imagines that the supervenience base doesn’t exist, he is asking us not to gauge our intuitions about what would be true were all material objects to not exist, but to instead imagine a world further devoid of such abstracta. I’m a fan of non-trivially true counterpossibles, but here I don’t think I have *any* clear intuitions. Compare: imagine we asked an Armstrongian, “If I remained intrinsically the same, but we destroyed all the states of affairs, would I still be 5’11”?” It’s not clear what the Armstrongian should say in that case: given I’m intrinsically the same, am I not still 5’11”?” But, equally, given the states of affairs no longer exist to make propositions about me true, isn’t it *false* that I am 5’11”?” Who knows what to say! So, I’m less on-board with Todd’s argument here, given the key role that this

counterpossible has to play. However, his argument has the benefit of being new—for a field bogged down in “Yet Another Paper About Presentist Truthmaking” syndrome, this is an addition with which we should be engaging.

In chapters 2–5, Todd gets stuck into the logical problem: assuming that the future contingents are false, what of logic? In chapter 2, he runs us through the different competing models of the open future. In chapter 3, we turn to a thread which pops up a few times in the book: that “will” is a “neg-raising predicate.” A sentence featuring a “neg-raising predicate” is one that, alongside a negation, is taken to imply a proposition that its semantic content does not imply. For instance, “I do not plan to go to the cinema” would usually be taken to imply “I plan to not go to the cinema,” even though—technically—its semantic content doesn’t license that implication (since you might have no plans whatsoever, in which case the former sentence is true but the latter is false). Todd argues that “will” is in the same position. To say that “It’s false that there will be a sea battle tomorrow” would, usually, be taken to imply that tomorrow there will not be a sea battle. Were that sound reasoning, the future wouldn’t be open (because, on Todd’s view, “Tomorrow, there will not be a sea battle” should be false, not true). Todd says that, at least in some contexts, we should resist this implication of neg-raising predicates; in particular, in the context of discussing the logic of future contingents, we should set aside the implication, allowing for the future to be open.

Chapter 4 picks up the baton again of comparing temporal truths with other truths—in this case, counterfactual truths rather than fictional truths. Todd meticulously lays out how the law of Conditional Excluded Middle (“If it had been the case that  $p$ , it would have been the case that  $q$  (if it had been the case that  $p$ , it would have been the case that  $\neg q$ )” is similar to the law of Will Excluded Middle (“It will be the case that  $p$  (it will be the case that  $\neg p$ ”). Just as it is relatively commonplace to deny the former, Todd argues that it is reasonable, given his theory of falsehood for all future contingents, to deny the latter. There’s a lot going on in this chapter and Todd’s attention to detail is pain-staking and rewarding. Its contribution to not just the philosophy of time but our understanding of counterfactuals is without doubt.

Chapter 5 will be of particular interest to the readership of this journal because it discusses the logic of omniscience. Todd argues that his theory, unlike other theories of the open future, allows for us to identify tense logic with the logic of an omniscient being’s memories and anticipations: God remembers that  $\Pi$  iff  $\Pi$  was the case and God anticipates  $\Pi$  iff  $\Pi$  will be the case. For example, God remembers the Battle of Trafalgar iff that battle took place. Similarly, God does not anticipate a sea battle tomorrow iff it’s false that there will be a sea battle tomorrow. (Todd then details exactly how to maintain a difference between the truth that God doesn’t have any anticipations about the future from the falsity that God anticipates nothing occurring in the future.)

In the remaining chapters, Todd deals with the practical issues about future contingents being false. We plan and act on beliefs about the future; if those beliefs are all false, what divides the rational decisions we make (saving in a pension, buying food to cook later) from the irrational (if it's false that I'm going on holiday next week, why bother renewing my passport?). (Indeed, this is a general problem for any open future theorist who believes that future contingents fail to be true.)

Chapter 6 contains what I found to be the most interesting part of the book. Todd again compares temporal truths to truths in other areas, returning to both counterfactual cases, e.g., "Had I flipped a coin slightly weighted towards heads, then it would have come up heads," and fictional cases, e.g., "Precisely 14,201 hobbits live in the Shire." It is *prima facie* plausible that there's no fact of the matter about what side the coin would have come up if flipped and that there's no fact about exactly how many hobbits live in the Shire according to *The Lord of the Rings*. Those *prima facie* plausible options both mirror Todd's theory of the open future. And in the counterfactual case, you are nevertheless licensed to say that the coin was *more likely* to come up heads. Todd says that the same idea can apply to temporal truths: it may not be true that I will survive into retirement, yet it's nevertheless rational for me to save money in my pension because "I *will probably* live until I retire" is true (even though "I *will* live until I retire" is false). Todd extends this claim about probability to fictional truths, arguing that all of the war elephants were probably killed in *The Lord of the Rings's* Battle of the Pelennor Fields—it's a claim unsettled by the fiction, but which Todd thinks it makes sense to say is *probably* true.

Showing that *prima facie* independent problems in philosophy have connections and are interrelated is always interesting—and so it is here. Having read Todd, I think there's a lot to be said about the connection between future truths, counterfactual truths, and fictional truths; I'm even minded to now agree with Todd that the claims about probability and fictional truth make sense even though I initially thought the idea mind-boggling.

Todd then teases out some ramifications of his treatment, with a particular focus on the "will probably" operator. Todd argues that "will probably" is its own operator, rather than an operator compounded out of a "will operator" and a "probably operator." From Todd's point of view, "I will probably live to retirement age" is captured by neither "Probably: WILL: Nikk lives to retirement" nor "WILL: Probably: Nikk lives to retirement." The former is wrong because, given Todd's theory of the open future, it's not the case that "WILL: Nikk lives to retirement" is true, so nor is it probable; Todd says the latter is wrong because in the future I either will have retired or not and there's no "probable" about it. (I wonder, though, why Todd doesn't just say that the latter is false because all future contingents are false?) Given this, Todd says that, in addition to the "will" and "probably" operators, we need a distinct "will probably" operator.

That operator, to me, sounds weird and inscrutable. But I admit it's no deal breaker. Given (i) Todd's theory of the open future, (ii) the claim that temporal, counterfactual, and fictional truth should receive substantially similar treatments, and (iii) the claim that there are facts about what would probably happen, what will probably happen, and what probably happened in a fiction, then, clearly, we need the new inscrutable operator. My personal position—and, remember, this is a book review and not a monograph, so don't hold me to it!—is that, given I am enamoured of (ii) and Todd has started to make me think (iii) is true, that makes me ever more certain that (i) is false; better to think that the future is closed (and there are future facts), that a theory of fictional truth should imply even very specific facts like those about war elephants and the exact population of the Shire, and that there are "brute counterfactuals" about what would happen given any particular antecedent. Claims about what will probably happen in the future, what would probably happen, and what's probable according to a fiction are then just claims about what credence one should rationally hold about these unknown—and in many cases unknowable—facts. My personal position, though, has its own ugly elements (for whilst a closed future seems palatable, implicit fictional truths of the type I would need are less desirable, and—worst of all—brute counterfactuals seem worryingly extravagant). So even though there might be costly commitments of Todd's theory (i.e. a distinct "will probably" operator), we shouldn't be in a rush to think this is damning.

Chapter 7 is effectively a republication of Todd and Rabern's *Noûs* article "Future Contingents and the Logic of Temporal Omniscience," which plays on the close connection Todd earlier established between problems with omniscience and the problem of future contingents, before bringing that to bear on supervaluationist and relativist competitors. It is worth noting that Todd includes a new appendix to that material, which is well worth a read.

Finally, in chapter 8, Todd discusses why it's acceptable to routinely talk *as if* there are true future contingents, even given his theory. The gist is to offer a comparison to other areas of philosophy, e.g. the metaphysics of material objects and the acceptability of common-sense claims, even given mereological nihilism. Being a veteran of that style of philosophy, I don't see anything to disagree with in this chapter.

The open future strikes me as an area of philosophy currently undergoing a bit of a renaissance. And Todd has done more than offer a simple contribution to that debate—his book both stands as required reading for anyone working on future contingents whilst simultaneously ensuring his theory is a prime contender as to which open future theory is best. *The Open Future* is an excellent philosophical work and I recommend it to everyone interested, not just in the open future, but also in the nature of omniscience, counterfactual and fictional truth, and the philosophy of language more broadly.