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Patrick Todd, The Open Future. Why Future Contingents are All False. Oxford: Oxford 2021. 212 p., ISBN 978-0-19-289791-6 (hardback).

Patrick Todd’s thought-provoking new book is dedicated to resolving the “problem of future contingents”: the question of what truth-value should be assigned to propositions about the contingent future.

One answer is that we should think about the truth-value of such propositions the same way we think about the truth-value of propositions about the contingent past and present: some such propositions have the truth-value *True*, and those that don’t have the truth-value *False*. This position, known as ‘Ockhamism’, must be rejected by anyone who holds that future-contingent propositions, though they might later *become* true, cannot yet *be* true, so long as the state of affairs to which they refer is still both future and contingent. But then what truth-value should be assigned to future-contingent propositions in the interim, while awaiting their future resolution as true or false? One possibility is to treat them as neither true nor false; another is to hold that all such propositions deserve the truth-value *False.* Todd’s book is a defense of this last position, on which “*future contingents are systematically false*” (2).

A proper appreciation of Todd’s project should begin with a review of the dialectical situation as he understands it. On the one hand, the so-called “grounding problem” provides open futurism a prima facie advantage over Ockhamism. What “grounds” the present truth of a proposition about the contingent future? If the past and present don’t determine the truth-value of a future-contingent proposition, and the future isn’t available to determine its truth-value, it’s unclear how it can *be* true. This puzzle about the grounding of future-contingent truths puts the Ockhamist on the defensive. But the open futurist, by denying future-contingent truth, avoids the problem altogether. Score one for open futurism.

On the other hand, open futurism faces multiple problems of its own, threatening its initial advantage. There are, to begin with, serious *logical* problems with the view. If *There will be a sea battle tomorrow* and *There will not be a sea battle tomorrow* are contradictories, then according to the Law of Excluded Middle (LEM), the disjunction of these two claims is a necessary truth: either there will be, or there won’t be, a sea-battle tomorrow. But then one of these disjuncts must presumably be true, and according to open futurism *neither* disjunct is true. What’s worse, if neither disjunct is true, then given the principle of Bivalence, both are *false*. Open futurism appears to be logically incoherent.

In addition to these logical problems, there are what Todd calls “practical” problems. Ordinary discourse is replete with *assertions* about the contingent future, a practice that’s hard to square with the open futurist’s claim that all such statements are systematically untrue. The practice of *betting* appears to presuppose future-contingent truth. (You win the bet when we find out that the future-contingent you bet on *was true.*) We make *predictions*, with different credences, about the contingent future (e.g., that there is a 30% chance that *it will rain tomorrow*), and it’s unclear how to make sense of this if, as open futurists hold, there is a 0% chance that any such statement is true. And when the predicted future comes to pass, we say that the person making the prediction *was proved right,* implying that the future-contingent the person asserted was true.

In sum, while the grounding problem gives open futurism an initial advantage over Ockhamism, the logical and practical challenges confronting open futurism appear to disqualify it from serious consideration. Todd’s aim in the book is to deflate these challenges, clearing the way for open futurism to take its rightful place as an attractive and competitive solution to the problem of future contingents.

The grounding problem for Ockhamism is usually demonstrated by appeal to some version of the principle that “truth supervenes on being” (TSB). But Todd is a Presentist, for whom only the present is real, so TSB threatens truths about the past as well as the future. Presentists have suggested various ways of responding to this “problem of the past,” but Todd isn’t happy with the solutions on offer, such as enriching present objects with primitive past-directed properties sufficient to satisfy TSB, or grounding truths about the past in an infallibly omniscient deity’s present memories. Though Todd allows that TSB is highly intuitive, he has to reject it, given his commitment to Presentism.

Todd therefore needs another strategy to underpin his critique of future-contingent truth. He finds it in a parallel with how one should reply to someone who maintains that there are fictional truths not contained in the story. How hot was the tea Sherlock Holmes drank after returning to his flat from Sir George Burnwell’s house in “The Beryl Coronet”? We want to say that there is no fact of the matter here, if the temperature was left unspecified in the story. In so responding, Todd suggests, “we are not proceeding from a claim about *truth in general*, but instead from a claim about *fictions in particular*” (18). In the same way, the denial of future-contingent truth can rest on an intuition about the future in particular, rather than the kind of intuition about truth in general found in TSB. That intuition about the future is that it’s produced by the present and the laws, and since, on Presentism, “the present and the laws are all that there is, . . . there shouldn’t be any facts about the future *beyond* those the present and the laws produce” (18). Given this intuition about the future, it follows that there aren’t any primitive future-directed facts, ungrounded in the present.

Todd does *not* have this intuition when it comes to facts about the past: whereas truths about the future must be derivative of the present, truths about the past needn’t be so derivative. Truths about the past would still be true even if the universe were now to pop out of existence, whereas putative truths about the future would *not* still be true if everything suddenly ceased to be. What the Presentist should do, in response to the problem of the past, is affirm that there are primitive past-directed facts which, in violation of TSB, aren’t specified by or inferable from facts about the present and the laws. Todd concludes his discussion of the grounding problem by noting that the rest of the book will “simply motivate or otherwise make plausible” (20) this asymmetry between past and future.

To his credit, Todd does not oversell the positive case he makes in favor of open futurism. “Perhaps this is not much of an argument,” he comments, adding that he’s unsure what more he could say to persuade those on the other side, and that he’s okay with that (19). Given the clash of intuitions between open futurists and Ockhamists, this may be the better part of valor. Ockhamists will likely find his arguments question-begging. It isn’t clear, for example, why defenders of future-contingent truth shouldn’t say that the sensitivity of supposed truths about the future to the universe’s ceasing to exist simply confirms the Ockhamist position that these truths are *contingent,* rather than showing that they aren’t true. Todd’s arguments are perhaps best understood as pumping the intuitions of those who are already inclined toward open futurism and resonate with his reaction to primitive future-directed facts as “mysterious and bizarre.”

The positive case for open futurism is fairly simple. It rests on deep intuitions, and it’s enough to identify and pump these intuitions. What’s required from the open futurist isn’t yet more ways of articulating this positive case, but cogent responses to the serious logical and practical objections that have been raised against open futurism. That’s the task to which 90% of the book is devoted.

In chapter 2 Todd lays the ground for his defense against these logical and practical problems by, first, developing three models of the undetermined future and, second, proposing a semantics for the *will*-sentences we use in talking about the future. On Model I (Ockhamism), there are primitive future-directed facts, these facts select a unique actual future out of the multiple causally possible futures, and it’s determinate which future is so selected; on Model II (Supervaluationism), there are also primitive future-directed facts, selecting a unique actual future out of the causally possible futures, but it isn’t determinate which future this is; finally, on Model III (Open Futurism), there are no primitive future-directed facts, so (given indeterminism) there is no actual future.

What implications do these models have for the truth-value of future contingents? Todd offers a modal semantics for ‘will’, treating it as a universal quantifier over all “available” futures: futures that are consistent with the past, the laws, *and the future-directed facts*. The available futures in each model will then depend on whether there are any future-directed facts, and what they are. On Model I, a future-tense proposition *p* will obtain in all available branches or in none, since there is exactly one available branch; so either *p* or *~p* is true, and if there are future contingents, there are future-contingent truths. On Model II there is also a single available branch, but it isn’t determinate which branch this is, so while the disjunction *p v ~p* is always true, neither disjunct can be assigned the truth-value *True.* Finally, on Model III, there is more than one available branch when *p* is contingent, and *p* obtains in some but not all of these branches; so the truth-conditions for *p* are never satisfied, the truth-conditions for *~p* are never satisfied, and all future contingents are false, given Bivalence.

Todd summarizes his position this way:

Semantically, *will* is a universal quantifier over all available branches.

Metaphysically, there are no primitive future directed facts, and so the available branches just are the causally possible branches.

Result: *future contingents are all false*. (40)

Todd emphasizes that this is *not* a “Peircean” approach on which ‘will’ *means* ‘determined’ and future-contingent truths are ruled out by definition. If Ockhamists are right about there always being a privileged future branch, will-statements could be true without determinism.

The first critique of open futurism Todd addresses is that Model III, on which future contingents are all false, is incompatible with the Law of Excluded Middle (LEM). He responds, not by abandoning LEM, but by arguing that his position does not violate LEM.

In maintaining that *There will be a sea battle tomorrow* and *There will not be a sea-battle tomorrow* can both be false, Todd is clearly disputing the principle of Will Excluded Middle (WEM), on which, for any future time T, it will be at T that *p* or it will be at T that *~p*. Though WEM seems to follow from LEM, it presupposes what Todd denies: that just as there is a unique actual past and present, there is also a unique actual future, in which either *p* is true or *~p* is true. Todd’s point can be put in terms of his modal semantics for ‘will’. To say that there *will* be a sea-battle tomorrow is to say that in all the available futures, if we check tomorrow, we’ll find a sea-battle, and to say that there *will not* be a sea-battle tomorrow is to say that in all the available futures, if we check tomorrow, we’ll find no sea-battle. We’ll find neither of these, if tomorrow’s sea battle is still contingent; so WEM fails.

Defenders of WEM respond that even if there is a semantic difference between *~(It will be at T that p)* (the contradictory of *It will be at T that p*) and *It will be at T that ~p* (its contrary), they are nonetheless logically or metaphysically equivalent. ‘Will’ is a so-called “neg-raising” predicate, setting up a context in which “what is in fact semantically wide-scope negation gets treated as if it belonged to the relevant embedded clause” (57). So, for example, *I don’t think that’s a good idea* implies *I think that’s not a good idea*, despite the fact that my not thinking it’s a good idea is completely compatible with my not thinking it’s a bad idea either. Again, *I don’t want to hear another word from you* has the unmistakable force of *I want not to hear another word from you*, though they are semantically distinct. *You don’t look well* is hardly distinguishable from *You look unwell.*

We accept these equivalences, despite their semantic differences, because we make the assumptions required by them—e.g., that I’m not indifferent to hearing or not hearing another word from you. These are natural assumptions to make, in context, but they are assumptions nonetheless. When it comes to *It’s not the case that there will be a sea-battle tomorrow* and *There will not be a sea-battle tomorrow*, there is also an assumption behind the slide from the first to the second, namely, that the past, the laws, and the future-directed facts aren’t “indifferent” with respect to the future: they select a unique actual future, in which there will either be a sea-battle tomorrow or there won’t be a sea-battle tomorrow. The difference between this case and the other cases of neg-raising is that only a philosopher would challenge this assumption. But the issue before us is precisely a philosophical issue—the context is “metaphysically loaded.” Where the assumption of a unique actual future is the very assumption in question, arguments in favor of this assumption, based on linguistic evidence presupposing it, are circular. WEM, unlike LEM, can be denied without wreaking logical havoc.

Todd follows up this critique of WEM with a chapter on Conditional Excluded Middle (CEM): (*p* > *q*) v (*p* > ~*q*). When evaluating a counterfactual conditional *p* > *q*, we look at whether *q* obtains in certain relevant *p*-worlds. Todd calls these relevant worlds the “counterfactually available” worlds (97). Just as he characterized the available futures as the causally possible futures consistent with the primitive future-directed facts (if any), and interpreted ‘will’ as a universal quantifier over available futures; so he characterizes the counterfactually available worlds as the closest worlds that are consistent with the counterfacts, and interprets ‘would’ as a universal quantifier over these worlds. Critics of CEM, like Lewis and Williamson, hold that in the case of “counterfactuals of contingency,” like *If I’d flipped this coin, it would have landed tails*, the counterfactually available worlds include some in which *q* and some in which ~*q*, so the universal quantification fails to hold: the claim that *q* would have obtained if *p*, and the claim that *q* would not have obtained if *p*, are both false. The parallels with Todd’s objection to WEM are obvious. Todd’s argument presupposes that there are no primitive future-directed facts, but the case against CEM also presupposes (*pace*, e.g., Plantinga) that there are no primitive counterfactuals of contingency. Defenders of Model I will surely protest, but Todd’s job is to show how Model III, given its assumptions about reality, can handle the challenge posed by WEM.

Before pivoting to the practical challenges facing open futurism, Todd turns briefly to the problem of future contingents and omniscience. Todd is a major player in the debate over divine foreknowledge and human freedom, so this short chapter is a bonus for anyone interested in that debate. But it’s more than a bonus. God is a proxy for the epistemic norms of an ideal knower. Positing a sempiternal omniscient being allows Todd to treat the logic of the tenses as the logic of perfect memory and anticipation. If *p* is logically equivalent to *God believes p,* there is an “intuitive equivalence” between F*p* (it will be that *p*) and *God anticipates p*, and between P*p* (it was that *p*) and *God remembers p*. This equivalence proves useful in clarifying some of the issues arising in later chapters.

Chapter 6 opens with a problem first articulated by A.N. Prior. If I bet that a certain horse will win, and that horse does win, an open futurist could refuse to pay up on the grounds that I was, in effect, betting on the truth of a certain future-contingent. Todd’s response is to make sense of betting without its presupposing any future-contingent truths. His suggestion is that betting can be understood as the making of an *agreement* to the effect that futures in which that horse wins are futures in which I’m owed the wagered amount, and futures in which that horse doesn’t win are futures in which I owe the wagered amount. This practice is compatible with there being no current truth about whether that horse will win. Regarding the related problem of the *credence* we should assign to, e.g., the claim that it will rain tomorrow, given that it’s now contingent whether or not it will rain tomorrow, Todd allows that this is the issue on which “the open futurist must be at his or her most revisionary” (130). Indeed, Todd’s position is that this credence is 0. But our shock will abate, he argues, if we just keep in mind that there can be a fact of the matter about the strength of current tendencies without there being a fact of the matter about how those tendencies will be resolved.

The prediction problem for open futurism is that when a predicted future arrives, we retroactively predicate truth of the prediction: “You were right.” The principle underlying this judgment is Retro-closure: *p →* PF*p.* As in his response to the problem of the past, Todd is anxious to distinguish his own defense of open futurism from ones he thinks don’t work. Chapter 7, from an essay co-authored with Brian Rabern, is wholly devoted to refuting “Open-closurism,” the idea (defended by, e.g., Thomason and MacFarlane) that one can affirm both open futurism and Retro-closure. This is one of the places where Todd makes effective use of the equivalences from his chapter on an omniscient knower. Putting complexities (and there are many) to one side, if there is a sea-battle going on now (*b*), then given Retro-closure, it follows that PF*b*, entailing that God remembers anticipating *b* yesterday; but if, relative to yesterday, the occurrence of this sea-battle was a future contingent, then given open futurism, *b* was then false (or at least untrue), and God *didn’t* anticipate *b* yesterday. Unless there can be intrinsic changes to the past, this is impossible. When it comes to Retro-closure and open futurism, you can’t have your cake and eat it too. The only way to rescue open futurism from the prediction problem is to reject Retro-closure. Todd’s way out is found in the chapter’s sole-authored appendix, whose moral can be summed up this way: “came true” is a better response to a successful prediction than “was true,” and it’s the latter that’s required under Retro-closure.

Finally, the assertion problem is that it’s sometimes *appropriate* to assert a future contingent, and it’s unclear how this can be so if future contingents are systematically false. Todd assimilates this problem to the one faced by other “eliminativists” whose strict metaphysics renders large swathes of ordinary language incapable of expressing literal truth. Though *I am sitting at my desk right now* may be literally untrue, if Trenton Merricks is right that there are no desks but only atoms arranged deskwise, it nevertheless isn’t untrue in the way that *I am sitting in my hot tub right now* is untrue; expressions embodying the “folk ontology” of desks and hot tubs can be replaced with other expressions, some conveying truth. When it comes to his own strict denial of truth to future contingents, Todd mentions two classes of will-statement that invite this “replacement strategy.” One is where ‘will’ conveys plans or intentions. “I’ll be at tomorrow’s meeting” conveys that, if things go according to plan, I’ll be at tomorrow’s meeting (and if it conveys anything stronger than this, its assertion is inappropriate). Given my plans, this is literally true, and insofar as “I’ll be at tomorrow’s meeting” communicates this truth, it is appropriate to assert it. The second class is tied to “worldly tendencies.” “It will rain tomorrow,” which for Todd is literally false, can be replaced with “If current tendencies don’t change, there will be rain tomorrow,” which is literally true. But perhaps these and other cases can be handled by a single qualifier. I remember my father injecting “God willing” into his conversation whenever he felt it would be especially hubristic to leave it out. It’s interesting, then, that Todd concludes his discussion of the assertion problem with the suggestion that it might largely dissolve if future-contingent assertions were prefaced with the Muslim Inshallah, “If God wills.”

This is a rich and stimulating book, and I’ve only scratched its surface in this review. Its value doesn’t come from persuading readers to switch sides: I was an Ockhamist before reading it and I’m an Ockhamist afterwards. But I used to think that the logical and practical objections to open futurism were devastating, and that’s no longer an opinion I can hold with any confidence. I do think that Todd relies overmuch on the defense that the linguistic data appealed to in these objections presupposes a privileged future rather than providing independent evidence in its favor; but for anyone drawn to the open futurist response to the grounding problem, Todd shows how it’s possible to maintain that position in good conscience. For defenders of open futurism, and even more so for its critics, Todd’s book is essential reading.