Future Contingency, Future Indeterminacy, and Grounding: Comments on Todd

Alan R. Rhoda

Christian Theological Seminary

The subtitle of Patrick Todd’s book *The Open Future* is “why future contingents are all false”. In this brief commentary paper I want to press Todd on three issues raised by this subtitle: (1) the nature of future contingents; (2) how we talk about future contingents and whether they could, indeed, be “all false”; and (3) the tension between the bold subtitle and Todd’s mostly defensive tone, particularly with respect to issues of grounding. In the spirit of constructive criticism, I’m going to argue that there are better ways of framing some of the core issues such that, had they been pursued by Todd, they would have made his argumentative goals easier to reach.

1. Propositions or Events? How to Think about Future Contingents

In a book about future contingents one might expect to see some initial reflection on the nature of future contingents. Unfortunately, Todd takes for granted throughout his book that these are best thought of as *propositions* of a certain sort, specifically, propositions “saying of contingent, presently undetermined events that they will happen” (Todd 2021, p. 3). I contend that it’s better to think of future contingents as events or, more exactly, as causally contingent *event-types*.

In the first place, by “contingent, presently undetermined events”, I take Todd to mean *causally contingent* events, that is, events both the future occurrence *and* non-occurrence of which are now causally possible in relation to whatever causal constraints (present conditions, laws of nature, etc.) are in effect. Since we don’t have a crystal ball by which to look forward in time and individually *token* specific events, we have to consider these as event-*types*, e.g., *a* sea battle as opposed to *this* sea battle. Even seemingly specific events like *Todd’s next birthday* are still somewhat generic in that they leave many concrete details unspecified—does he celebrate it at the nearest local pub or elsewhere? So we can think of those as event-types as well. Now, if we’re already thinking of causally contingent event-types, then why not identify *those* as future contingents? We can still have propositions *about* those things and debate their truth values, but we cut out the middle-man, so to speak, by focusing on what the propositions are about rather than on the propositions themselves. It is not, after all, propositions but events that chiefly concern us as we deliberate about the future. No one in the midst of ordinary life cares about whether propositions of a certain sort are true or not. To frame matters in that way is to start at an oddly high level of abstraction. But we all care whether this or that type of event is likely to happen and, if so, what to do about it. The forecast says rain is expected. Now, where’d I put my umbrella? Is this a good time to enter the housing market? Are interest rates and/or prices likely to come down soon? Should I ask her to go out with me? Would she be likely to say yes, or would I just be embarrassing myself? And so on. The contingencies that most matter for us lie in the concrete world of events, not in the abstract realm of propositions.

In the second place, thinking about future contingents as causally contingent event-types affords a much more natural way of relating future contingents to single-case objective probabilities or *chances*. If future contingents are causally contingent event-types, then we can readily and naturally define them as events whose chance of occurring is intermediate, i.e., greater than 0 and less than 1. Such events can obviously only lie in the future. After all, the chance that an event *has* happened can only be either 0 or 1 since either it has happened or it hasn’t. Likewise, the chance that a proposition *is* true can only be either 0 or 1 because, well, either it is true or it isn’t. If we take future contingents to be propositions rather than events, then we have no straightforward way to relate them to intermediate chances. We can’t say <A sea battle will occur tomorrow> has a 0.5 chance of *being* true because it doesn’t—again, it either is true or it isn’t. We could say, perhaps, that it has a 0.5 chance of *having been* true depending on how events turn out, but we can only say that if we assume retro-closure,[[1]](#footnote-1) and no self-respecting open futurist will want to assume that. Alternatively, we could say that the proposition has a 0.5 chance of *becoming* true, thereby conceptualizing its becoming-true as an event, but this implies that the proposition wasn’t true already, which begs the question against Ockhamism. In sum, if we take future contingents to be propositions, then I see no clear way to attribute intermediate chances to them without begging important questions, whereas if we take future contingents to be causally contingent event-types, then we can say that they just *are* those event-types (if any) whose chance of occurring is intermediate.

1. Talking about Future Contingents: Moving beyond *Will* and *Will Not*

If we do take future contingents to be event-types, then we will frame debates about future contingency, fatalism, and foreknowledge in terms of propositions *about* future contingents. This doesn’t disallow any of Todd’s analysis, but it does encourage a *broadening* of that analysis. As already noted, Todd restricts the relevant class of propositions to ones that say of causally contingent events “that they will happen”. But, other than the fact that these are the kinds of propositions most discussed in the literature on future contingency, why add this restriction? It has the unfortunate effect of *excluding* lots of propositions about causally contingent event-types from consideration. Even worse, it excludes the very sorts of propositions that are *most apt* for expressing future contingency, such as *might and might not* and *will probably* propositions (e.g., <A sea battle *might and might not* occur tomorrow>) or propositions about the chances of future contingent events (e.g., <There is now a 0.40 chance of a sea battle tomorrow>). Given an event-focused understanding of future contingency, such propositions are just as much *about* future contingents as <There will be a sea battle tomorrow>. I submit that including them in his analysis would only have helped Todd’s case for open futurism.

For example, consider Todd’s case against *will excluded middle* (WEM). By limiting himself to only *will* and *will not* propositions Todd leaves himself no *positive* way to express the “middle” between F*p* (It will be the case that *p*) and F~*p* (It will not be the case that *p*). He can (and does) argue for a scope distinction between ~F*p* and F~*p*, such that the former does not semantically entail the latter, but if we limit ourselves to only *will* and *will not* propositions, then the “middle” between F*p* and F~*p* has to be expressed negatively, viz., ~F*p* ˄ ~F~*p*. It’s like trying to express modal *contingency* with only *necessity* operators. It can be done, of course, but it’s considerably less intuitive than if you’re allowed to use possibility or contingency operators as well. Now, F() is, we might say, a *future determinacy* operator. To say that there *will* be a sea battle—F(A sea battle occurs)—is to represent the future as determinate with respect to the occurrence of a sea battle.[[2]](#footnote-2) I say “determinate” because F*p* implies that it is *not an open question* whether the future is (going to be) such that *p* because the future *is* (going to be) such that *p*. As Todd’s semantics would have it, this is because “in all available futures, *p*” (Todd 2021, p. 30). Other kinds of propositions about future contingents, however—e.g., <There is a 0.5 chance of a sea battle>—call for a *future indeterminacy* operator, which I’ll dub M() for *might and might not*. To say M(A sea battle occurs) is to represent the future as indeterminate with respect to the occurrence of a sea battle. I say “indeterminate” because M*p* implies that it remains *an open question* whether the future is (going to be) such that *p* because, as Todd’s semantics would have it, there are available futures such that *p* and available futures such that ~*p*. With M*p* in hand to express the idea that “in some but not all available futures, *p*”, it is very easy to see that there is conceptual space between F*p* (“in all available futures, *p*”) and F~*p* (“in no available futures, *p*”) and thus that WEM is not a *semantic* truth. If it’s true at all, it’s true only because one has adopted a *metaphysics* that excludes true M-type propositions by ensuring that there is always only one available future.

A similar argument using M*p* can be offered to show that retro-closure (RC) is false, or at least not a semantic truth. Suppose that M*p* is true at time T1. It follows from Todd’s semantics that neither F*p* nor F~*p* is true at T1. Now suppose that at time T2 it comes to be the case that *p*. Does it somehow follow from this that F*p* was true at T1 as per RC? Obviously not! If M*p* was true at T1 then it should continue to have been true at T1 regardless of how things pan out afterwards. Pace RC, then, *p* does not entail PF*p* but rather P(F*p* ˅ M*p*). If RC is true at all, then, it’s true only because one has adopted a *metaphysics* that excludes true M-type propositions by ensuring that there is always only one available future, thereby collapsing the distinction between P(F*p* ˅ M*p*) and PF*p*.

One additional consequence of adding M*p* alongside F*p* to our analytical toolkit is that it cannot be that propositions about future contingents are *all false*, for whenever both F*p* and F~*p* are false, M*p* will be true instead.

1. Pressing the Case for Open Futurism

Todd’s subtitle boldly promises a strong positive argument for his position, and yet the tone of the book is mostly defensive, with frequently voiced concessions that Ockhamism (the dominant competitor to Todd’s open futurist position) is more common-sensical. For one who argues—convincingly, I think—that the fundamental issues dividing open futurism and its competitors are *metaphysical* and not semantic, Todd seems oddly reticent to press his case on metaphysical grounds. And when he does so, in Chapter 1 mainly, he seems preemptively to disarm, as it were, by eschewing widely accepted grounding principles like *truth supervenes on being* (TSB) in favor of the bruteness of past truth and a fiction-based approach to future grounding. In this last section I want to press Todd on his approach to grounding. I’m going to argue that Todd doesn’t succeed in establishing the bruteness of past truth and that his appeals to fiction actually point back to the very sort of broad grounding principle that he rejects.

Todd’s discussion in Chapter 1 presupposes causal indeterminism and ontological presentism. It easy to see why this combination would be attractive to an open futurist: If no non-present things exist (as per presentism) and if what does presently exist leaves some causal tendencies indeterministic, then there seemingly exists nothing that could ground true *will* or *will not* propositions about future contingents. Thus, if (contingent) truth supervenes on being, then there are no such truths, and open futurism follows.[[3]](#footnote-3) Todd worries, however, that this would also lead to an open past, because on presentism there are no past realities that could serve to ground truths about the past. But why couldn’t some kind of *present* reality do so? Todd spends a few pages (Todd 2021, pp. 13–15) discussing Hartshorne’s proposal that God’s memories, understood as necessarily persistent traces of past events, could ground truths about the past. Without, however, identifying any particular flaws in Hartshorne’s proposal, or any of the other proposals that presentists have offered to address the open past problem,[[4]](#footnote-4) Todd brushes them all aside as “not plausible” on the grounds that, “per impossible”, truths about the past should remain even if all traces of the past should be erased.[[5]](#footnote-5) As he puts it in a principle he calls SBP, “If it is true that there was a sea-battle in 2019, it would *still* be true that there was a sea-battle in 2019, even if everything went out of existence, and there came to be nothing at all” (Todd 2021, p. 15).

Before considering Todd’s fiction-based approach to grounding, I want to push back on his reasoning thus far. First of all, SBP is self-defeating as stated, for if there came to be “nothing at all”, then there would not even *be* the truth that there was a sea-battle in 2019. Indeed, there would be no truths and *a fortiori* no truth such as SBP.[[6]](#footnote-6) Todd recognizes this problem and quickly clarifies (Todd 2021, p. 16) that he doesn’t really mean “nothing at all” but rather nothing “on which the truth of this proposition could plausibly be thought to supervene.” That’s not terribly helpful, however, because it doesn’t tell us how precisely to *revise* SBP. Suppose Todd revises SBP to say that <A sea battle occurred in 2019> could remain true even if everything *concrete* went out of existence, while positing a Platonic host of necessarily existing abstract truth-bearers to ensure that <A sea battle occurred in 2019> continues to exist. Unlike SBP this position isn’t obviously self-defeating, but truth-bearers alone aren’t enough to give us truths, especially not *contingent* truths like <A sea battle occurred in 2019>. So to get the past truths that Todd wants it seems like he’s going to have to posit something more—something like necessarily persistent contingent *facts* corresponding to every true proposition about the past. But is there any difference between these facts and *traces* of the past? I don’t see any, for which contingent facts about the past there are would have to owe their existence to the actual occurrences of past events, just like traces. Or suppose that Todd rejects the need for any contingent facts in addition to necessarily existing truth-bearers. All we need, he might say, is that propositions like <A sea battle occurred in 2019> that correctly describe the unique actual past contingently possess the intrinsic property *being true*. If he takes this route, then Todd seemingly throws out not only TSB, but the correspondence theory of truth as well. This gives us something like the sort of *brute* truths about the past that Todd wants, but it doesn’t get rid of traces any more than the previous attempt. For, we must ask, why do only those propositions about the past that correctly describe the unique actual past have the intrinsic property *being true*? Clearly they must have this property *in virtue of* the past’s having been the way it was. But then these brute truths about the past are *themselves* traces of the past. It seems, then, that every effort to get rid of traces brings us right back to them. If we don’t retain the actual past itself (as on the growing block theory), then the very truth or fact, if it is a truth or fact, that there was a unique actual past *itself* ensures that there is a trace of the unique actual past that singles out that very past. To give up traces altogether is to give up the facticity of the unique actual past and with it any hope of a solution to the problem of the open past.

Having seen fit to do without TSB, the question remains whether Todd can offer any sort of grounding argument for an open future. He thinks he can, by drawing an analogy between truths about the future and truth in fiction.

When I am having the intuition that there are no facts about the future beyond those determined by the present, … I am … having an intuition similar to the one nearly all of us already have about fictions. I am having the intuition that the facts about the future stand to facts about the present and the laws as facts about fictions have to the fiction-determining facts. That is, I have the feeling that the present and the laws *produce* the future—and … since the present and the laws produce the future, there shouldn’t be any facts about the future *beyond* those the present and the laws produce. (Todd 2021, p. 18)

The idea here is that just as we don’t suppose there to be truths in fiction beyond what the author has stated or what can be reasonably inferred from the author has stated (e.g., whether Harry Potter had orange juice with breakfast on some particular Hogwart’s morning), nor should we suppose there to be truths about the future beyond what’s implied by the future-specifying facts. And if those facts are non-deterministic, then they do not specify a unique actual future.

So far so good. I think this is a very plausible way to motivate the idea that presentism plus indeterminism yields an open future. But I think the analogy also works *against* Todd’s claim that truths about the past don’t need any grounding. For just as we understand that authors of fiction give us only partially specified worlds with many open questions, we also understand that authors can *revise* their worlds and even retract what they have already written. Suppose an author writes a 100-page story but then decides to “scrap” the first 50 pages and replace it with a different back-story instead. Are the scrapped pages still true “in the fiction”? I’d say no. Maybe they are still “hypertrue” in some alternative fictional hypertime, but it’s no longer true in the author’s *now-canonical* fictional universe. Likewise, if all remnants of the past from the past events themselves to all traces thereof were to go out of existence, then I don’t see any reason to think it would still be *true* that, say, dinosaurs once roamed the earth. It might still be “hypertrue” in some alternative ontological hypertime, but it wouldn’t be simply *true* because it would lack any canonical ontological backing. In short, it seems to me that Todd’s appeal to fiction winds up supporting TSB, or something very like it. If there are no truths in fiction that are not *grounded* in the author’s text/intent, then by analogy there should be no truths in reality that are not grounded in the ontological “text”.

Summing up, as a fellow open futurist, I’m very sympathetic to the general project of Todd’s book. Nevertheless, I’ve pressed Todd on three points connected to his book’s subtitle that reflect some of our differences. First, I argued that future contingents are better thought of as causally contingent event-types rather than as propositions. Second, I argued that propositions *about* future contingents should not be limited to the *will* and *will not* propositions that Todd focuses on. Third, I argued that Todd’s attempts to get away from TSB and any need to ground truths about the past actually reinforce the need for something like TSB.

**Works Cited**

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1. Retro-closure is Todd’s term for the thesis that *p* → PF*p*, i.e., that if *p* is the case, then it has always been the case that *p* will be the case. For example, retro-closure says that if it rains on this Tuesday, then it was true on Monday and on all previous days that it was going to rain this Tuesday. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. I’m setting aside the Geachian understanding of *will*, on which see Todd (2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. This sort of reasoning has been developed by Mike Rea and Alicia Finch into an argument that Ockhamism is incompatible with presentism plus bivalence and thus requires an eternalist ontology. See Rea (2006) and Finch and Rea (2008). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. I discuss several such proposals, including Hartshorne’s, in Rhoda (2009). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. On p. 20 Todd (2021) says that “if we are presentist open futurists” then “TSB simply won’t give us what we want”. But nowhere does he *show* that TSB won’t give us what we want. He merely appeals to his own idiosyncratic intuition that truths about the past could remain true without a supervenience base. I, for one, don’t share that intuition. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. If it be suggested that the disquotation principle, True(*p*) iff *p*, ensures that even if there were nothing it would still be *true* that there is nothing, I reply that this is specious reasoning based on a misapplication of the principle. Disquotation is a *metalinguistic* principle, not a metaphysical principle. All it says is that we can use the *truth* predicate to switch between an object language wherein *p* and a metalanguage wherein True(*p*). The principle cannot be used to do ontological bootstrapping. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)