

Jesus' return as lottery puzzle: a reply to Donald Smith

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Abstract: In his recent article, 'Lottery puzzles and Jesus' return', Donald Smith says that Christians should accept a very robust scepticism about the future because a Christian ought to think that the probability of Jesus' return happening at any future moment is inscrutable to her. But I think that Smith's argument lacks the power rationally to persuade Christians who are antecedently uncommitted as to whether or not we can or do have any substantive knowledge about the future. Moreover, I think that Christians who are so antecedently uncommitted have available objections they can reasonably press against Smith's arguments. In the article, I attempt to bring out these objections.

Introduction

In his 'Lottery puzzles and Jesus' return', Donald Smith (2009) argues that Christians should accept a very robust scepticism about the future. He thinks this because, among other reasons, a Christian ought to think that the probability of Jesus' return happening at any future moment is inscrutable to her. But I do not find Smith's argument convincing. It seems to me that Smith's argument lacks the power rationally to persuade Christians who are antecedently *uncommitted* as to whether or not we can or do have any substantive knowledge about the future, or that we can, at any rate, have justified confidence in propositions about the future. Those Christians who are so antecedently uncommitted, moreover, have available objections they can reasonably press against Smith's arguments. For example, it is not, perhaps, all that clear how inscrutable the odds *really are* with respect to Jesus' return. And what is more, even if it were clear, it is *not* clear that there are *any* truly random future events whose odds a Christian can reasonably calculate.

If God has foreknowledge and is sovereign over the future (as many Christians believe), then it might be that even the odds of a *lottery's* outcome should be regarded as inscrutable. This latter objection undermines the notion that we can have knowledge about (or, take *any* non-sceptical approach towards) lottery propositions, and in so doing, presents an untoward consequence of Smith's argument.

In what follows, I will attempt to press objections along these lines. In order to properly couch my objections, I will, in the second section, briefly summarize Smith's argument for the claim that Christians ought to embrace a robust scepticism about the future. In the third and fourth sections, I will offer, in ascending order of strength, two arguments for the conclusion that the odds of Jesus' return may not be inscrutable, after all. The weaker of the two arguments will be based on its being plausible that seemings can justify beliefs and, if so, its seeming to the Christian *that Jesus will not return before this afternoon* plausibly justifies the Christian's belief *that Jesus will not return before this afternoon*. The result of the Christian's being justified in having this belief is that, as I'll go on to show, it justifies the Christian's belief that the odds of Jesus' returning before this afternoon are low.

To motivate the stronger argument, I will cite past and present end-times prognosticators. Plausibly, if Jesus says no man can know either the day or the hour of his return to earth, then any man who claims to know such information is wrong. But Jesus *does* claim that no man can know either the day or the hour of his return; so, any man who claims to know such information *is* wrong. The upshot of this section's argument will be that such end-times predictions look for all the world to reveal similarities between Jesus' return and lottery puzzles. Smith argues that Jesus' return is not relevantly like a lottery puzzle because the odds of his return are inscrutable. However, if Jesus' return is, as I'll argue, like a lottery puzzle, this will undermine Smith's argument. For if Jesus' return is like a lottery puzzle, then the odds of Jesus' return aren't inscrutable after all; and this is the crux of Smith's argument.

To be clear, Smith is antecedently uncommitted as to whether or not we can or do have knowledge regarding lottery propositions. But, I think an interesting upshot of his argument is that it potentially undercuts the Christian's ability to have knowledge in lottery puzzle cases. So, in the last section I will give one final argument (a brief argument from fore-ignorance about lottery outcomes and any future event whatever) that I think will show just how Smith's argument provides the relevant undercutter. In other words, I'll claim that his argument from Jesus' return undermines lottery puzzle-based knowledge (or other non-sceptical) ascriptions. For many readers, I take it, this will prove to be an untoward consequence of Smith's overall argument.

Smith's argument explained

Here is how Smith sets up his argument. Smith takes it for granted that the following is true:

Single Premise Closure [SPC]: Necessarily, if S knows p, and competently deduces q from p and thereby comes to believe q while retaining knowledge of p throughout, then S knows q. (Smith (2009), 38)

Moreover, SPC's truth, combined with what follows, puts us in 'good position' to know lottery propositions (*ibid.*). That is, SPC's truth combined with the fact that

[l]ottery puzzles . . . have the following general structure: (a) There is an ordinary proposition that we are inclined to take ourselves to know, (b) there is a lottery proposition that we aren't inclined to take ourselves to be able to know *even though the proposition is probable*, and (c) the lottery proposition can be competently deduced from the ordinary proposition thereby, via SPC . . . (*ibid.*)

indicates that, plausibly we *can* know (or, at any rate, take any of the most promising non-sceptical approaches to) lottery propositions.

But, now consider:

The Return: Suppose I claim to know that I will mow my lawn this afternoon. The proposition that I will mow my lawn this afternoon entails the proposition that Jesus will not return before then. So, I'm able to competently deduce that Jesus won't return before this afternoon from the proposition that I will mow my lawn this afternoon. Given SPC, and my alleged knowledge that I will mow my lawn this afternoon, I can come to know that Jesus will not return before this afternoon. But, suppose I am a Christian. Then, on the basis of Jesus' teaching on the subject, I should deny that I can come to know that Jesus won't return before this afternoon. (*ibid.*, 39)

The upshot of The Return is that if I am a Christian and I claim to know *that I will wash my car* (or whatever) *this afternoon*, I am (assuming SPC) directly contradicting Jesus' own words from the Gospel of Mark in which he says that *no-one* knows the day or hour of his return. If that is right, then I, as a Christian, ought not to claim to know *that I will wash my car this afternoon*.

One obvious rejoinder to this argument, however, might come from so-called lottery puzzles. One might be tempted to think that The Return is a bit (or a lot) like a lottery puzzle. There seems to be, for example, some minuscule chance that I will be hit by an asteroid as I attempt to finish this article (and so, will not finish this article); however, this does not keep me from claiming to know *that I will finish this article*.¹ Perhaps, so the argument goes, The Return is like this. Perhaps the odds of Jesus' return before this afternoon are really low, in which case I *can* know such things as *that I will finish this article* or *that I will wash the car this afternoon*.

Smith sees this coming (hence the title of his article). The Return, says Smith, is *not* relevantly like a lottery puzzle. In a lottery puzzle, the odds, while difficult to discern, perhaps, are not absolutely inscrutable. The odds of Jesus' returning

before this afternoon, on the other hand, *are* inscrutable. The odds of Jesus' returning before this afternoon are inscrutable because, if I am a Christian (who takes the second coming of Jesus seriously), then I believe that Jesus will return at an hour that is unknown to me. The Return, then, is not like a lottery puzzle; there is no *probability* of Jesus' return before this afternoon (and, thereby, The Return fails to meet Smith's requirement (b) of a lottery puzzle). But, why, exactly, are the odds of Jesus' return inscrutable? Here, Smith offers some justification:

[A]s I'm understanding 'the probability that p is absolutely inscrutable for me', to say that the probability that p is absolutely inscrutable for me is not merely to say that the precise probability that p is very difficult to estimate. There are lots of propositions the precise probability of which is difficult to estimate without being absolutely inscrutable for me. For instance, it's difficult to estimate the precise probability of my being visited by intelligent extraterrestrial life in my lifetime. Nevertheless, it's plausible that it's unlikely that I'll be visited by intelligent extraterrestrial life in my lifetime. That the probability that p is absolutely inscrutable for me implies that I cannot sensibly make even a rough estimate of the probability that p; that is, I cannot sensibly estimate the probability that p to be likely, I cannot sensibly estimate the probability that p to be unlikely, and I cannot estimate the probability that p to be just as likely as not. (*ibid.*, 40)

So, the odds of Jesus' return are absolutely inscrutable. The Return, therefore, is not like a lottery puzzle.

Instead, The Return is more like the following.

Infallible Abductors [IA]: Suppose tomorrow morning Smith wakes up to find a note on his pillow. It reads as follows: 'We have chosen a day and hour for your future abduction; on that you can be certain. We shall not reveal the reasons behind our choice; nor would you be able to understand all of these reasons if we did; nor, even, if you could understand some of these reasons, would you be able to discern whether these reasons had come to fruition. See you . . . sometime!' (*ibid.*, 39)

Smith thinks that, if he believes this note's content, he will then have the belief that the time of his abduction was chosen for reasons that he knows nothing about. On the basis of this belief, Smith thinks he ought to refrain from assigning probability to the proposition *that the infallible abductors will return before lunch*. The probability of the proposition *that the infallible abductors will return before lunch*, in other words, is inscrutable for Smith. If that is true, it is also true for the probability of Jesus' return before this afternoon. The probability of Jesus' return before this afternoon's being inscrutable, then, should lead the Christian to embrace a robust scepticism about the future.

(Before I move on, let me note that, for the most part, I leave out discussion regarding Smith's claim that not only *knowledge* ascriptions, but *any* of the most promising non-sceptical approaches to lottery puzzles can't be applied to The Return. I don't think anything critical to my argument rests on this omission. The intent of the article is to offer objections that cast doubt on Smith's crucial claim that the odds of Jesus' return are inscrutable, therefore making Jesus' return unlike

a lottery puzzle. If I successfully show that the odds of Jesus' return aren't, in fact, inscrutable, then this will be sufficient to undermine Smith's argument.)

In the next two sections, I hope to show that it is not at all obvious how inscrutable the odds of Jesus' return before this afternoon really are. It is to that task I now turn.

The odds of Jesus' return *aren't* inscrutable

I am not convinced that the Christian ought to think that the odds of Jesus' return at a particular time are inscrutable. Recall IA. Suppose it has been several days since Smith received the note from the infallible abductors. Then a few more days pass without his being abducted. And now suppose that a year has passed, then two. Is it not plausible that, on a given day two years down the road, Smith's inclination will be that the odds of his being abducted on that particular day are low? He has not been abducted thus far: why think that will change on this particular day? It seems to me that Smith, in such a scenario, could plausibly think that the odds of his abduction *on that day* are fairly low. But if that is true, then, since Jesus has not returned for around 2,000 years, it is plausible to conclude that he will not return today. And if I am planning on washing my car this afternoon, and I am not a general sceptic about future knowledge (and still assuming SPC), I think I can plausibly claim to know *that I will wash the car this afternoon*.

But I do not wish to move too hastily here. A pointed objection to this line of reasoning might be something like what follows.

Sure, after many months or years it *will seem* to Smith as though the odds of his being abducted before lunch are fairly low. But so what? You're merely making a psychological claim to the effect that, over time, Smith will find it more and more difficult to worry about being abducted before lunch. But this does not obviously entail that Smith becomes, over time, more and more justified in his belief that the odds of his abduction happening before lunch are low.²

I concede that it is not *obvious* that Smith would become more and more (or at all) justified in believing that the odds of his abduction before lunch are low, even if it has been several years since the infallible abductors left him the threatening letter. But to be more careful here, let me attempt to argue for the plausibility of Smith's belief that the odds of his abduction happening today are low.

Suppose that, today, it *seems* to Smith that he will not be abducted by the infallible abductors before lunch. Suppose further, that it seems to Smith that he will not be abducted because it has been several years since he received the threatening letter. Moreover, the more and more time has passed since Smith received the letter, the more and more it *seems* to Smith that he will not be abducted before lunch. There is some reason to think that seemings may provide non-inferential justification;³ and, if seemings *do* provide non-inferential justification, then, plausibly, Smith has some justification to hold the belief he

forms based on his seemings. Since Smith's seemings are based on the fact that all years heretofore have passed without his being abducted, Smith's seemings are the sort that can plausibly justify his seemings-based beliefs.

So, suppose that Smith forms the belief *that I will not be abducted before lunch* on a day in which it seems strongly to him that he will not be abducted. Suppose further that not only does it seem to Smith that he won't be abducted, it seems to him that he has *seemings*-based justification for thinking he won't be abducted. As a result, he's justified in believing not only (the non-epistemic proposition) *that I won't be abducted*, but also the (epistemic proposition) *that I'm justified in believing that I won't be abducted*. Finally, having justification to think he's justified also justifies him in believing that the chances that he'll be abducted before lunch are relatively small.⁴

The same can be said, *mutatis mutandis*, for the Christian with respect to The Return. Suppose that, today, *it seems* to the Christian that Jesus' return will not happen before this afternoon. Suppose, further, that it seems to the Christian that Jesus will not return before this afternoon because, on all previous afternoons for around 2,000 years, Jesus has not returned. Moreover, the more time has passed without Jesus' return, the more *it seems* to the Christian *that Jesus will not return before this afternoon*.

So, suppose that the Christian forms the belief *that the odds of Jesus returning before this afternoon are low* on days it strongly seems to her that Jesus will not return. We can further suppose, as with Smith above, that not only does it seem to the Christian that Jesus won't return before this afternoon, it seems to her that she has *seemings*-based justification for thinking Jesus won't return before this afternoon. As a result, she's justified in believing not only (the non-epistemic proposition) *that Jesus won't return before this afternoon*, but also the (epistemic proposition) *that I'm justified in believing that Jesus won't return before this afternoon*. Finally, having justification to think she's justified also justifies her in believing that the chances that Jesus will return before this afternoon are relatively small. Plausibly, then, the odds of Jesus' return are not inscrutable after all.

The Great Disappointment, Harold Camping, and how The Return is like a lottery puzzle

In this section, I will attempt to provide another reason for the Christian to reject Smith's claim that the odds of Jesus' return are absolutely inscrutable to her. Consider the Great Disappointment. In the mid-nineteenth century, there was a sect of American Christians known as the Millerites. The Millerites were so named because of their leader, William Miller, whose claim to fame was his prediction, based on certain passages of the Old Testament book of Daniel, that Jesus would return to earth in the year 1844. One of his followers, Samuel Snow, took Miller's predictions a step further. Snow predicted not just the year that Jesus

would return, but the day as well. Snow predicted that Jesus would return on 22 October 1844. Needless to say, Jesus did not return on that day (or even in that year). The fact that so many of Miller's followers waited expectantly for Jesus' return, only to have 1844 come and go, became known as the Great Disappointment.

I will argue that reflection on the Great Disappointment reveals how similar The Return is to a lottery puzzle. If I am right, and The Return is relevantly similar to a lottery puzzle, if we can make knowledge claims about lottery propositions (or take any of the most promising non-sceptical approaches toward them), then plausibly we can make knowledge claims about (or take any of the most promising non-sceptical approaches towards) The Return.⁵

Before I argue how the Great Disappointment reveals how similar The Return is to a lottery puzzle, consider a more recent example. Consider the pronouncement by current end-times prognosticator, Harold Camping. Camping says that he (like Miller and Snow before him) knows when Jesus will return. Jesus will return, Camping says, on 21 May 2011.⁶ But, if Jesus is right – and nobody knows the day or the hour of his return – then Camping is wrong; Camping *does not* know that Jesus will return on 21 May 2011.

To see why Camping's predictions reveal how similar The Return is to a lottery puzzle, suppose that today is 21 May 2011. Can I conclude from the fact that Camping is wrong about his knowing the date of Jesus' return that I know *that I will wash the car this afternoon*? It seems to me that if I am not generally sceptical about future knowledge, then, plausibly, I *can* conclude that I know *that I will wash the car this afternoon*. I can plausibly claim to know *that I will wash the car this afternoon* because it is plausible that the odds of Camping's being right about his knowledge claim are low.

Of course Smith may object that, if Jesus *were* to return on 21 May 2011, it does not follow that Camping *knew* that Jesus would return on that day (and the same can be said, of course, for Snow and 22 October 1844). At most, all that would follow, if Jesus is right that no one knows the day or hour of his return, is that Camping had a justified true belief. This, then, is clearly true: Camping *could* have a justified true belief about the exact time of Jesus' return. But what are the *odds* that Camping could have the relevant justified true belief? Are the odds absolutely inscrutable? I don't see why they should be. After all, it's plausible that the upshot of the Markan ignorance passage isn't merely that no one will *know* the day or hour of Jesus' return; rather, it's also that no one will have *any good idea* about the day or hour of Jesus' return. So, plausibly, the odds are low that Camping could have the relevant justified true belief.

Things don't get any better if we consider Camping's having made a *lucky guess* about Jesus' return. If Camping's belief about Jesus' return is based on a guess, it seems plausible to me that by Camping's having so guessed, I can reasonably conclude that Camping's having made a *lucky guess* is unlikely. If that is right,

then I think I can conclude that the probability of Jesus' return today (if today is 21 May) is relatively low.

And the same can be said, *mutatis mutandis*, if today is 22 October 1844 and I have the belief *that I will clean the wagon this afternoon*. It seems plausible to me that, if it is 22 October 1844, and Snow has claimed to know (or have a justified true belief or made a lucky guess) that Jesus will return today, that I can know Snow is wrong about his alleged knowledge (or justified true belief or lucky guess) with respect to Jesus' return and can, thereby, conclude that I can know *that I will clean the wagon this afternoon*.

The upshot of this conclusion is that it seems to make The Return, at least on specific days (e.g. 21 May 2011; 22 October 1844), something relevantly like a lottery puzzle since there seems to be a probability that meets Smith's requirement (b) of the lottery puzzle structure. And, if I think that all I need properly to claim to know anything substantive about the future (or, at any rate, be in a *good position* to know or otherwise take any of the most promising non-sceptical attitudes towards it) is the low probability of Jesus' return, then I think I can claim to know that *I will wash the car this afternoon* and *that Jesus will not return before this afternoon*. I conclude, then, that at least on certain days, The Return is relevantly similar to a lottery puzzle. And if I can know *that I will not win the lottery*, I can know on certain days *that Jesus will not return before this afternoon* because, at least on those days, I can know *that I will wash the car this afternoon*.

A final argument and conclusions

Before I conclude, one further objection needs to be offered. Smith (2009) thinks that The Return is not relevantly like a lottery for one key reason: lotteries are random; Jesus' return, however, is planned. For: God the Father knows the exact day and hour that Jesus will return; and it is supposed to be this fact (i.e. the fact that God's plans regarding The Return are inscrutable) that undermines the ability inductively to assess the probability of The Return.⁷ This move, it seems to me, is less than convincing. Typically, Christians regard God as sovereign; God is not ignorant of what will happen in the future; he presides over all of it. If that is right, then it might be that *just any* future event whatever – the outcome of a lottery included – is not truly random. God knows the outcome of the lottery just as much as he knows what hour he will send Jesus back to the earth. In fact, on some Christian views, it is (or at least may be) *planned* just as much as Jesus' return. If that's right, then a given lottery is (or at least may be) no different, odds-wise, from Jesus' return.

The *randomness* of the lottery, it turns out, is plausibly just a matter of our fore-ignorance. We humans lack the requisite foreknowledge to see what is coming in the future. So, the upshot is either that we have to deny knowledge with respect to

lottery puzzles (I can't know, for example, that I will not win a lottery in which the odds of winning are 1/150,000,000,000 and I have just one ticket), or deny that we should have a robust scepticism about future knowledge in light of Jesus' return. But, if I am not a sceptic about future knowledge in the first place, the former will seem rather unpalatable. So, my guess is that, if I am not a sceptic about future knowledge in general, I *can* rightly claim to know something about the lottery's outcome (e.g. that I will not win if I have just one ticket and the odds of winning are 1/150,000,000,000). And, if I am right about that, then, if I am not a sceptic about future knowledge in general, I can rightly claim to know *that I will wash the car this afternoon* even in light of Jesus' possible return before then.

So, while it's surely possible that Jesus will return before this afternoon, I think I can claim to know *that I will wash the car this afternoon*. I think I can claim to know this because, at least on certain days, The Return is like a lottery puzzle. And if I can properly claim to know lottery propositions, I can properly claim to know that Jesus won't return before this afternoon. And if the odds of The Return's being inscrutable to me are the only putative reason I shouldn't claim to know *that I will wash the car this afternoon*, then because the odds of The Return plausibly *aren't* inscrutable after all, I can plausibly claim to know *that I will wash the car this afternoon*. And if so, then Smith has failed to provide the Christian with a convincing reason to give up on substantive knowledge about the future.⁸

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Notes

1. Assuming, of course, that I am not already a sceptic about future knowledge.
2. Thanks to E. J. Coffman for alerting me to this objection.
3. For example, see Barnett (2010), Pryor (2000), Huemer (2001), George Bealer (2000), Bonjour (1998), Rosen (2001), and Sosa (1991).
4. Thanks to E. J. Coffman for help on this point.
5. From here on, I'll leave off the bit about the most promising non-sceptical approaches.
6. <<http://www.familyradio.com/index2.html>>.
7. Thanks to Robin Le Poidevin for helping me clarify this point.
8. I wish to thank E. J. Coffman, Donald Smith, and Robin Le Poidevin for helpful and instructive comments on earlier drafts of this article.