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The Unreal Future

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Abstract: Two prominent A-theories of time, presentism and the growing block theory, hold that

INTRODUCTION

Certain A-theories of time claim that the future is unreal. Since this claim is common sense, it appears to be a strength of such views. But actually the unreal future threatens these theories at the core. The reason is simple. A-theories in action imply that the future is real. So the doctrines and implications of A-theories contradict each other.

This paper presents a new paradox for certain A-theories of time. It is revealed to us when we seriously ask, What really happens when unreal future events become present? We find that such becoming is impossible because the implication of an *unreal* future event *e* becoming real is that the selfsame event *e* is *real* in the future. This is revealed by closely observing what happens when future contingent propositions which have *indeterminatet*? We

relation to present events. Future events may become real, but only if they become present. Presentism holds that *being present* is an objective property that certain events have, the only events that exist.

Growing blockers only partly agree with presentists. They agree that the future is unreal. However, they disagree about the past. The past is real and comes to be such through being present. We often speak about past events, and about them we often say

This is what she, somewhat inappropriately, says: ‘Remember, the future is unsettled. Both of you are going into this freely. And, besides, weddings are sometimes cancelled, even at the last minute. Therefore, the future cannot be real. But there is much more to our position than that.’ The other guests exchange confused looks. ‘Time flows. It isn’t just some static frame to relate events situated at different points in a block universe.’

Here is the proper word-world relationship concerning your wonderful wedding, and all other future events, for that matter. The future-tense expression (f) ‘Tomorrow the Joneses will marry’ captures temporal reality correctly. So f has a structure which is identical to the proposition it expresses, (p) <Tomorrow the Joneses will marry>. Events have temporal properties, such as being past, being present, and being future. These are ‘A-properties.’ And only tensed propositions can depict them. Whatever event should unfold tomorrow, it really is in the future. The wedding is currently unreal. When it happens, only *then* does it become real.’

3. BECOMING REAL

It is rude to interrupt a sincere, heartfelt toast. So we don’t. But the A-theorist is leaving out one all-important detail. Once that detail is fully understood, it will be clear that the unreal future thesis cannot stand. To see why, we leave the rehearsal dinner and look ahead. We can’t fully understand tensed theories of time from a static perspective. We must try to understand what it is for time to flow and must see that flow in operation. A-theories can’t rest on the bare claim that the future is unreal. There must be an examination of the implications of future events *becoming real*.

The unreal future thesis requires that future contingent propositions be *indeterminate*. So in our case, p is indeterminate. Things change once the marriage becomes present and

thereby real. In such an event, p becomes true. Future contingent propositions are crucial for examining the unreal future. They shall help us to see the implications of unreal future events becoming real.

Aristotle and, more recently, Łukasiewicz gave future contingents much thought. They believed that if such propositions were either true or false before their event, then such events would be fated. Because of this they thought that the principle of bivalence - that every proposition is either true or false - breaks down where future contingents are concerned. A-theorists have agreed that a 'future-tense proposition is neither true nor false if there is not yet anything in the facts for it to correspond or fail to correspond with' (McCall 1966: 276), and have used this thought to try to undo B-theories (McCall 1966: 273).

Now, here's the problem Aristotle and Łukasiewicz tried to avoid:

The Fatalism Problem

Friday: (A) <Tomorrow the Joneses will marry> is TRUE-at-Friday.

So, (B) The Joneses' marriage cannot fail to take place on Saturday.

Now, let's see if the indeterminate truth-value helps to avoid this result:

The Indeterminism Solution

Friday: (1) <Tomorrow the Joneses will marry> is INDETERMINATE-at-Friday.

Saturday: (M) The Joneses' marriage takes place.

Thus, (2) <Tomorrow the Joneses will marry> becomes TRUE-at-Saturday.

Therefore, (3) The Joneses' marriage cannot fail to take place *on Sunday*.

4. FUTURE REALITY IS NECESSARY

To adequately represent the unreal future requires a future-tense proposition with indeterminate

truth-value. The problem, as we've just seen, is that the real tomorrow has not gone away, but reemerged in a different, unexpected way. Challenging (A) was thought to be the way to keep future contingents from being true. This way out has nonetheless resulted in (2), a true future contingent. The fated event to avoid in (B) has come to pass in (3), but on a different day. That in essence is the paradox.

Before meeting attempts to defuse the paradox, some points of clarification are needed. First, apprehending the paradox is quite difficult. Doing so requires a Gestalt shift. So some patience is required. The best way, it seems to me, to come to apprehend it, is to take the following steps. First compare (A) and (B) from *The Fatalist Problem* with (2) and (3) from *The Indeterminism Solution*. Next, check to see that there are no significant differences between them, only differences necessary to capturing the different theories. So different days are referred to ('Sunday' instead of 'Saturday' in *The Indeterminism Solution*) and the proposition in (A) is true, while the proposition in (2) becomes true. The reason for this last diffe

TRUE-at-Saturday. This happens, once more, because of *M*, The Joneses' marriage taking place. Nothing else changes.

I stress these points about propositional identity and truth-value change in anticipation of a certain response. Some will claim that as *M* occurs, there is a different proposition involved than <Tomorrow the Joneses will marry>, perhaps (*t*)<Today the Joneses are married>. Of course, we can express anothe

6. CAN DATING SAVE THE MARRIAGE?

The Explicit Indexical Solution didn't help the A-theorists. Maybe a 'dated formulation' will avoid both the first and the second problem. A date specifically targets a par

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The presentist must claim that future contingent propositions such as p never become true. So there must never be present events like M to make such propositions become true. The only way to save presentism, in short, is to eliminate the present.

9. THE GROWING FUTURE

The growing block theory has suffered its own setbacks. The reason the block was said to be growing in the first place was to keep the future unreal. The growing blockers may accept our results gracefully, and admit there is but one giant block covering every temporal nook of the universe. If, however, they cling to the growing block, then it's a block that is impossibly strange.

A growing block generates more than the past. It must produce duplicate events which grow into the future. The future is unreal. But once something happens the duplicates of all present events are thrown into the future. The only real future events have already happened.

10. THE FUTURE OF A-THEORIES

A-theorists cannot paraphrase their way out of the paradox. Or, at least, it seems they cannot. At this paper's start, I mentioned two other possible routes for avoiding the paradox. A-theorists could translate the paradox-generating propositions into symbols and try to show I have erred in my reasoning. This retreat to symbolism won't work. First, none of the three 'Solutions' is an argument. Each simply shows the results of a particular future-tense proposition becoming true. Second, p isn't a proposition. It stands for one. And if the proposition which p symbolizes generates a paradox, then so does p .

A-theorists will surely lodge theoretical objections against the paradox. But, I believe, the whole of this paper has shown why none will work. I do, however, understand that A-

