

How the Present Depends on the Future

I'll use the name *anti-realism about the future* for the view that there is now no fact of the matter about what will happen in the future. This paper is about whether anti-realism could be motivated by saying that it's common sense; I shall argue that it cannot. The reason for this is that we're committed to cases in which the present depends on the future, in a sense explained below.

This is of interest for the ontology of time, at least for those interested in what common sense is committed to in the ontology of time, since anti-realism, at the very least, goes quite nicely with the view that the future isn't real. (Here's the thought: truths require truthmakers, but an absence of truths suggests an absence of truthmakers.) Anti-realism, then, is compatible with both *presentism* (on which only present things are real) and the *growing-block view* (on which only present and past things are real).

Why think that anti-realism is common sense? Michael Tooley writes that:

Among non-philosophers, certain beliefs concerning the nature of time seem to be quite widely accepted. One is the belief that there is a fundamental difference between the past and the future – an idea often expressed in terms of the claim that, while the past is fixed and settled, the future is open, and not yet determined. Thus the world is, on this view, characterized by a deep asymmetry.¹

There are, of course, other things that might be meant by saying that the future is open, other than anti-realism. Most people think that the future is *epistemically* open in a way that the past is not open; they believe that the future cannot be known, in the way that the past is known. And most people also think that we have the ability to freely choose some aspects of our futures, a fact to which I'll return below. For now, our only issue is anti-realism – which is a thesis about the existence of facts of the matter about the future. If the “openness” of the future amounts to the absence of truths about the future, this is it true that common sense is committed to anti-realism?

Tooley's reason for thinking that it is so committed is that common sense is committed to an *openness asymmetry* – a “fundamental difference between the past and the future,” when it comes to their “openness.” We infer common sense's commitment to

¹ Tooley, M., *Time, Tense, and Causation* (Oxford, 1997), p. 11

anti-realism *from* its commitment to the openness asymmetry. And it's the attribution of the openness asymmetry to common sense I'll argue against here, on the grounds that common sense is committed to cases in which the present depends on the future.

I'll argue that if we ask ourselves what metaphysical views most non-philosophers are *committed to*, we should say that they are committed to the denial of the openness asymmetry. So I'm not directly challenging Tooley's claim that most non-philosophers believe in the openness asymmetry. I'm going to argue that most non-philosophers believe in cases in which the present depends on the future, and that those beliefs commit them to the falsity of the openness asymmetry. I think this is sufficient (once some objections are handled) to show that the openness asymmetry is not part of our common sense metaphysic. Compare the way that Armstrong and Lewis get to the claim that the objective similarity of some individuals is a "Moorean fact"² (setting aside their additional claim that no philosopher should deny a "Moorean fact"). Armstrong claims that "sameness of type" is something that "ordinary language (and so, ordinary thought) perfectly recognizes."³ But this is not, presumably, because most non-philosophers would respond in the affirmative if you asked them whether there are objective similarity relations. Rather, this is because most non-philosophers talk, think, and act in a way that warrants being interpreted as committed to objective similarity relations. (Ordinary judgments and affirmations of similarity and sameness of type are obviously the main pieces of evidence here.) Whether or not Armstrong and Lewis are right, in interpreting common sense in this way, their method is correct: to look at what most non-philosophers say, think, and do, and give the best interpretation of them that we can. That's how we figure out what "common sense is committed to."

There are two reasons all this matters. It matters from the perspective of descriptive metaphysics – the project of trying to figure out what our common sense metaphysic *is*. But it also matters from the perspective of non-descriptive metaphysics, because some philosophers take the claim that common sense is committed to anti-realism as *prima facie* reason to endorse anti-realism. (Consider, e.g., Armstrong and Lewis' view that

² Armstrong, D., "Against 'Ostrich Nominalism'," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 61 (1997), pp. 440-9, at pp. 440-1, and Lewis, D., "New Work for a Theory of Universals," *Papers in Metaphysics and Epistemology* (Cambridge, 1999), pp. 8-55, at pp. 20-1.

³ Armstrong, *op. cit.*, p. 441

“Moorean facts” are not to be denied.) But I’m nowhere assuming that these philosophers are right. If doing metaphysics by appeal to common sense is a lot of bunk, then so much the worse for anti-realism about the future being motivated by common sense.

So I say that the best interpretation of non-philosophers is that they believe in cases in which the present depends on the future. What does “dependence” here amount to? Consider three cases in which, according to common sense anyway, the present depends on the past:

- i. Whether I am presently your *brother* depends on our histories – whether we were born of the same parents (or, alternatively, whether we were raised in the same family). *That I am your brother* depends on the fact *that we were born of the same parents*.
- ii. Whether my meal is presently *kosher* depends on its history – whether it was prepared in a kosher kitchen, whether the meat was slaughtered properly, etc. *That the meal is kosher* depends on the fact (among other things) *that it was prepared in a kosher kitchen*.
- iii. Whether a certain landform is presently a *fort* depends on its history – whether (for example) it was built by Legionnaires who intended to make a fort, etc. If the forces of nature coincidentally conspired to blow sand into a fort shape, the resulting landform would not be a fort.⁴ *That it is a fort* depends on the fact (among other things) *that it was intentionally built*.

It is uncontroversial that the present *causally* depends on the past (*that the lights are on* depends on the fact *that I flipped the switch*), but the dependence in these cases is not causal. The landform’s existence of course does depend causally on the Legionnaires intentions, but there is another sort of dependence at work here. The fact that we were born of the same parents does not *cause* us to be brothers – rather our brotherhood *consists* in the fact that we had the same parents. Similarly, that it was prepared in a kosher kitchen does not *cause* the meal to be kosher; that it was so prepared (among other things) *comprises* its being kosher. And, less obviously, the fact that *the landform is a fort* is not the causal result of the Legionnaires’ intentions. The fort’s very existence is the causal result of their intentions (among other things), but the intentions do not *cause* it to be a fort (as opposed, say, to a mere fort-shaped landform); the fact that it was intended to be a fort *comprises* (among other things) its being a fort.⁵

⁴ The case is from van Inwagen, *Material Beings* (1991), p. 124.

⁵ Cf. Elder, C., *Real Natures and Familiar Objects* (MIT, 2004), Chapter 7

What more can be said about the nature of this dependence? It seems counterfactual in some cases (had the meal been prepared differently, it would not be kosher) but in others it's not clear what to say (if we'd been born of different parents, we wouldn't have been brothers?). We can further characterize this dependence, though, by noting that the fact *that the room is illuminated* supervenes only on the facts concerning the causal and spatiotemporal properties that the room has *now*, while the fact that my meal is now kosher, for example, supervenes not only on the causal and spatiotemporal properties that my meal has now, but also on its historical properties. We can imagine two meals that are presently causally and spatiotemporally identical, where one is kosher and the other is not, two men who are presently causally and spatiotemporally identical, where one is my brother and the other is not, and two landforms that are presently causally and spatiotemporally identical, where one is a fort and the other is not. In these cases the present facts – about whether my meal is kosher, about whether you are my brother, or about whether the landform is a fort – supervene on facts about the past.

At least, so says common sense. The best interpretation of most non-philosophers – the way they talk, think, and act, when it comes to brothers, meals, and forts – is that they are committed to cases in which the present depends on the past. It is in *that* sense of dependence that I claim that the best interpretation of most non-philosophers is that they are committed to cases in which the present depends on the future. In other words, they are committed to cases in which the facts at *t* supervene on facts about the future (relative to *t*), in other words, cases involving two *distinct* situations (at *t*), that are causally and spatiotemporally identical at *t*, where what makes the situations distinct is not the histories of the two situations, but their futures. Here's the cases:

1a. In 1891, Gauguin abandons his family to work as a painter in Tahiti, not knowing for certain whether he will succeed. But he succeeds, and the aesthetic value of his success outweighs the moral cost of his leaving. We would say: "His decision, in 1891, was justified."

1b. In 1891, Gauguin abandons his family to work as a painter in Tahiti, not knowing for certain whether he will succeed. He fails to achieve anything worthwhile. We would say: "His decision, in 1891, was not justified."⁶

⁶ Cf. Williams, B., "Moral Luck," in *Moral Luck* (Cambridge, 1981), pp. 20-39

2a. In the top of the ninth inning, Ramirez drives in the go-ahead run, and the Red Sox take the lead. Their opponents fail to score in the bottom of the ninth. We would say: “Ramirez drove in the winning run, in the top of the ninth inning.”

2b. In the top of the ninth inning, Ramirez drives in the go-ahead run, and the Red Sox take the lead. But their opponents score two runs in the bottom of the ninth, and win the game. We would say: “Ramirez did not drive in the winning run, in the top of the ninth inning.”

3a. In 2007, Simon falls into a coma and exhibits no movement, reflexes, breathing, or responses to stimuli. And he never wakes up again. We would say: “Simon died in 2007.”

3b. In 2007, Simon falls into a coma and exhibits no movement, reflexes, breathing, or responses to stimuli. But in 2008 he wakes up. We would say: “Simon did not die in 2007.”⁷

4a. On Monday, Aristotle lays a concrete foundation, without any specific intention. This leads, by Friday, to his construction of a temple. We would say: “Aristotle began building the temple on Monday.”

4b. On Monday, Aristotle lays a concrete foundation, without any specific intention. This leads, by Friday, to his construction of a tollbooth. We would say: “Aristotle did not begin building a temple on Monday.”⁸

5a. On Monday, Charles drops his watch, and it breaks into many tiny pieces. They are never reassembled. We would say: “The watch was destroyed on Monday.”

5b. On Monday, Charles drops his watch, and it breaks into many tiny pieces. But on Tuesday he has them put back together again. We would say: “The watch was not destroyed on Monday.”⁹

Suppose I’m right that this is what we would ordinarily say, in these cases. This is enough, I claim, to interpret common sense as committed to pairs of situations which are distinct (at time t), but which are causally and spatiotemporally identical at t , and where the difference lies in the futures of the two situations. For if common sense is committed to Gaugin’s being justified in 1891, in case (1a), but to his not being justified in 1891, in

⁷ I think this is the best interpretation of the “Report of the Ad Hoc Committee of the Harvard Medical School to Examine the Definition of Brain Death” (*Journal of the American Medical Association* 205:6, 1968, pp. 85-8). According to the Report, “irreversible coma” is sufficient for death, where “irreversible coma” is defined by appeal to the concept of a “permanently non-functioning brain.” I take this literally: if the non-functioning is permanent – meaning that the brain *will never* function again – then the patient is dead; if not, then she is alive.

⁸ Cf. Aristotle, *Ethics*, Book X, Chapter 4.

⁹ See [author’s paper].

case (1b), then whether Gauguin is justified in 1891 depends on whether he will succeed in the future (relative to 1891). And *mutatis mutandis* for the other cases: whether Ramirez' RBI is the winning run depends on whether the Red Sox win the game, whether Simon is dead depends on whether he'll wake up, whether Aristotle has begun building a temple depends on whether he'll build one, whether Charles' watch is destroyed depends on whether it'll be reassembled. And what is essential here is *not* to resist this conclusion on the basis of the principle that the present can't depend on the future, but to imagine what you would ordinarily say about each individual case, and what the best interpretation of this would be, when it comes to your metaphysical commitments.

I'm not offering an argument here against anti-realism about the future, or the growing block view, or presentism. If you're committed to any of those views, then you might have good reason to say something different about these cases, something different from what I claim we're ordinarily say about them. Or you might have good reason to interpret what we would ordinarily say in some other way. My only claim here is that this is what we would ordinarily say, and that the most straightforward interpretation of this is a commitment to the dependence of the present on the future.

This is more obvious in some cases than it is in others. It would be weird to say, in (2b), "Ramirez didn't drive in the winning run," because this would suggest that someone else on his team did – but there was no winning run, for his team. Similarly, in (5b), the natural thing to say was that Charles' watch was broken and repaired, not that it "was not destroyed." But I think the point stands that, from a common sense point of view, in (2b) Ramirez didn't drive in the winning run (because the Red Sox didn't win), and in (5b) Charles' watch wasn't destroyed (and then brought back to existence by person who repaired it), even if we wouldn't go so far as to *say* it, using those words.

It's important to note that my argument, that common sense countenances cases in which the present depends on the future, is consistent with the view that sentences – even 'timeless' or 'untensed' sentences – are only true or false relative to a time. It might be thought that defenders of this view are poised to object to the argument offered above, since, it could be argued, a sentence like 'In 1891, Gauguin's decision is justified' is true when evaluated relative to 1900, but not true when evaluated relative to 1891. But I don't think this is a threat to the argument offered above. I argued that we can imagine

pairs of situations which are distinct (at time t), but which are causally and spatiotemporally identical at t , and where the difference lies in the futures of the two situations. The (semantic) thesis that truth is always relative to a time, even if it's true, doesn't threaten this.

The question of whether common sense is committed to the dependence of the present on the future could have been stated as a question about concepts. It is part of our ordinary concept of brotherhood that whether I am your brother depends on our histories; given this, common sense is committed to the dependence of the present on the past. (We can imagine people without any concepts of this kind – no concepts of F s where whether x is presently F depends on x 's history, or whatever – and we might want to say that *for them* the present does not depend on the past.) Our question, then, is whether any of our concepts are “future dependent,” in the sense that our concept of brotherhood is “past dependent.” And my argument is just that our concept of *being justified in a course of action*, our concept of *hitting the winning run*, our concept of *being dead*, our concept of *beginning to build something*, and our concept of *destruction* are all “future dependent” concepts.

Someone could object to this, on the grounds that although it looks like we have some “future dependent” concepts, such concepts are impossible – because it's sometimes impossible to ever determine with certainty whether a “future dependent” concept applies to a given individual or not. But this is not a good reason to rule out the possibility of such concepts a priori. It's sometimes impossible to ever determine with certainty whether a “past dependent” concept applies to a given individual or not, since our evidence of the past is imperfect. And it's sometimes possible to ever determine with certainty whether an unexceptional concept such as *having a mass of 1 kilogram* applies to a given individual – if the individual is located too far from the earth to be properly measured. (It's irrelevant that this is not logical or metaphysical impossibility; it's not logically or metaphysically impossible to determine with certainty whether a “future dependent” concept applies to a given individual.)

So, I have argued, common sense is committed to the dependence of the present on the future. But if the present depends on the future, in the way that I have argued that it does, then the past depends on the future as well. In the *middle* of the ninth inning,

whether Ramirez hit the winning run in the top of the ninth depends on whether the Red Sox hold on to win in the bottom of the ninth. So common sense is committed to the dependence of the past on the future as well. It is therefore wrong to claim that common sense supports the openness asymmetry, because the dependence of the present and past on the future ensures that any openness in the future entails an openness in the present and past as well. If whether Ramirez hit the winning run five minutes ago depends on whether the Red Sox win five minutes from now, then the supposed asymmetry is an illusion. If the future isn't fixed (and there's presently no fact of the matter about whether the Red Sox will win), then the past isn't fixed either (because that implies that there's presently no fact of the matter about whether Ramirez hit the winning run). The idea of a "fundamental difference," as part of our common sense metaphysics, has to be given up. And, therefore, so does the idea that anti-realism about the future is common sense.

Two objections to this conclusion, the second more serious than the first. The first objection is phenomenological; it concedes that the interpretation of ordinary language does not yield any commitment to the openness asymmetry, but maintains that our ordinary *experience* of the world is temporally asymmetrical, in the way that it presents the world as being. The openness asymmetry, it can be urged, is not something to attribute to common sense via our thought and talk, but something to be *felt* in the course of ordinary experience. The future never presents itself, in the way that the present (if not the past) does; the openness of the future is therefore part of the phenomenology of ordinary experience. The future *feels* open; the present (if not the past) does not. There is a phenomenological asymmetry between the present and the future.

Much of this seems right to me. But should we, on this basis, take the openness asymmetry to be a widespread belief among non-philosophers? I think the grounds for doing so are just as good as the grounds for taking an analogous asymmetry about space to be a widespread belief among non-philosophers. For consider the phenomenology of our ordinary experience of space. That which is spatially distant never presents itself, in the way that the spatially present does. There is a phenomenological asymmetry between the spatially present and the spatially distant. That which is near seems fixed, in a way that the distant seems open. This is, indeed, an interesting point – reason to attribute a

latent spatial presentism to our visual system, perhaps – but it would be a mistake to attribute, to common sense, the view that there is a fundamental difference (in openness) between the spatially present and the spatially distant, on the basis of this phenomenological difference.

The second objection, again, admits that ordinary talk is not suggestive of the openness asymmetry. The openness asymmetry, it is urged, is an essential element in our ordinary conception of ourselves as free agents. Now, obviously, most non-philosophers do think that the future is “open” in a way that the past is not “open,” since most non-philosophers do think it makes sense to deliberate about the future, and it doesn’t make sense to deliberate about the past. And most non-philosophers surely also think that we can now change the future, in a way that we can not now change the past, and that our actions are causally relevant to the future, in a way that they are not causally relevant to the past. So our question is whether all these commitments amount to a commitment to the openness asymmetry that we were discussing above.

The sense of “openness” we have been discussing concerns the existence of truths about the future. “Logical fatalism” notoriously infers that we don’t have free will from *realism about (all of) the future* – the view that all statements about the future are either presently true or presently false. The question of whether anti-realism about the future should be counted as part of our common sense beliefs about free will, then, amounts to the question of whether we should take common sense to endorse the validity of the logical fatalist’s inference. In other words, our question is whether common sense is committed to incompatibilism about free will and realism about the future.

Two reasons not to think so. First, if common sense in any way suggests realism about the future, and common sense is committed to free will, then it is more charitable to *not* attribute incompatibilism to common sense, than to do so, since charity enjoins us to interpret common sense as *consistent*, when we can. This is a version of Hume’s argument in “Of Liberty and Necessity,” (*Enquiry*, Section XIII) in which a compatibilist notion of free will is defended, on the grounds that it provides a consistent interpretation of common sense. Unless we have reason to attribute incompatibilism (“No action, performed at *t*, is free unless there was no fact of the matter, prior to *t*, about whether the action would be performed”) to common sense, the charitable thing is *not* to do so.

Second, incompatibilism about free will and realism about the future is false, and charity enjoins us to interpret common sense as *right*, when we can. I think the best way to argue for this is to note that the fact that something *will* happen does not entail that it *must* happen, in any sense threatening to free will. The actual obtaining of a state of affairs doesn't preclude the possible obtaining of alternative states of affairs. The fact that it is true now that I will eat cornflakes tomorrow is irrelevant to the (logical or metaphysical) modal status of the proposition that I will eat cornflakes. But only some kind of logical or metaphysical necessity of the proposition that I will eat cornflakes could threaten the idea that I shall freely choose to eat them (aside from more mundane threats, like coercion and brainwashing).

This is just the smallest of gestures in the direction of a defense of compatibilism about free will and realism about the future. But I say that these two reasons, both invoking a charitable interpretation of common sense, are enough to vindicate the idea that the best interpretation of common sense, even a common sense deeply committed to free will, does not involve the openness asymmetry, and hence does not involve anti-realism about the future.