

KNOWING FUTURE CONTINGENTS

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ABSTRACT: This paper argues that we know the future by applying a recent solution of the problem of future contingents to knowledge attributions about the future. MacFarlane has put forward a version of assessment-context relativism that enables us to assign a truth value 'true' (or 'false') to future contingents such as "There Will Be A Sea Battle Tomorrow." Here I argue that the same solution can be applied to knowledge attributions about the future by dismissing three disanalogies between the case of future contingents and the case of knowledge attributions about the future. Therefore none of the traditional conditions for knowledge can be utilized to deny that we know the future, as I argue in the last section.

KEYWORDS: future contingents, knowledge attributions about the future, John MacFarlane, assessment-context relativism

We know the future: this paper is going to demonstrate it. Whether or not the thesis of determinism is true, we know the future. Whether or not the future is genuinely open, we know the future. By applying MacFarlane's¹ recent solution of the problem of future contingents to knowledge attributions, this paper shows that we know the future.

"The Man Who Will Get The Job Has Ten Coins In His Pocket": you won't find an epistemologist who is not familiar with this proposition. It was famously deployed by Gettier² to refute the traditional tripartite analysis of knowledge as true justified belief. Gettier's proposition is peculiar in one respect: it isn't easy to see whether and how one could evaluate it as true or false because it contains a future fact. Whether or not (and how) a truth-value can be assigned to so-called *future contingents* has boggled the minds of philosophers since Aristotle's "There Will Be A Sea Battle Tomorrow."

Future contingents should be of particular interest to epistemologists too: Gettier's counterexample consisted in putting forward a proposition, "The Man Who Will Get The Job Has Ten Coins In His Pocket," which is TRUE, BELIEVED by Smith, and JUSTIFIED. Still, intuitively Smith does not know it – and therefore the traditional three conditions on knowledge are not sufficient. This is because

¹ John MacFarlane, "Future Contingents and Relative Truth," *The Philosophical Quarterly* 53 (2003): 321-36.

² Edmund Gettier, "Is justified true belief knowledge?" *Analysis* 23 (1963): 121-23.

Smith has been told by the company's CEO that Jones will get the job, and Smith has also seen that Jones has ten coins in his pocket. Therefore Smith is justified in believing that the man who will get the job has ten coins in his pocket. In fact, it is Smith himself who will get the job – and Smith has ten coins in his pocket too!

But now we can easily see that Gettier's proposition constitutes a counterexample to the analysis of knowledge as true justified belief only if Gettier's proposition is indeed true. But the proposition appears to be a future contingent: therefore it can constitute a counterexample only if we resolve the issue of future contingents in such a way that we can assign a truth-value to future contingents; and that truth-value will have to be TRUE (or FALSE) rather than some third truth-value (i.e. Lukasiewicz's *indeterminate*).

But Gettier's counterexample isn't too much of a problem, given that there are plenty of Gettier-type counterexamples which do not involve future contingents. There is a much more general epistemological question posed by the issue of future contingents: the fact that we claim to know future contingents all the time, and that we often act upon our knowledge and other people's knowledge of future contingents.³ And when we do so, we behave perfectly rationally. What needs vindicating then is knowledge attributions whose content is a future contingent⁴: I Know That The President Will Be In The Fourth Vehicle Of The Motorcade, you can imagine a conspirator say. Not only does the conspirator's speech not sound weird or inappropriate, but whether or not the conspirator does in fact know makes quite a difference!⁵

Here's another example from Goldman:

Let us grant that I can know facts about the future... T intends to go downtown on Monday. On Sunday, T tells S of his intention. Hearing T say he will go downtown, S infers that T really does intend to go downtown. And from this S concludes that T will go downtown on Monday. Now suppose that T fulfils his intention by going downtown on Monday. Can S be said to know that he would go

³ More on this in Section III.

⁴ Smith would have known that the man who will get the job has ten coins in his pocket if Jones rather than Smith himself had gotten the job – this suggestion is implicit in Gettier's counterexample.

⁵ A clarificatory point: when I talk of vindicating our knowledge of future contingents, one should bear in mind the distinction between knowledge attributions being warranted and knowledge attribution statements being true. The former, differently from the latter, doesn't depend on the truth condition on knowledge being satisfied. But the former, differently from the latter, does not imply that the agent to which knowledge is being attributed does in fact know.

downtown? If we ever can be said to have knowledge of the future, this is a reasonable candidate for it.⁶

Recently MacFarlane⁷ has put forward a proposed solution to the problem of future contingents which could be deployed to vindicate our knowledge of future contingents. I turn to this attempt in the next section.

I

MacFarlane puts forward a version of truth-relativism which promises to be able to assign the truth-value true (or false) to future contingents without sacrificing what MacFarlane calls the *indeterminacy intuition*: the idea that the future is genuinely open.

On the other hand, there is a strong temptation to say that the assertion does have a definite truth-value, albeit one that must remain unknown until the future ‘unfolds’. After all, once the sea battle has happened (or not), it seems quite strange to deny that the assertion was true (or false). I shall call the thought that the assertion does have a definite truth-value ‘the determinacy intuition.’⁸

MacFarlane’s account aims to accommodate both the ‘indeterminacy intuition’ and the ‘determinacy intuition.’ On his view, truth is relative to its context of assessment. In the case of future contingents such as “There Will Be A Sea Battle Tomorrow,” then, the statement will be true when assessed from a future context – say tomorrow in the midst of battle. When assessed today, the statement is neither true nor false. This gives us a way of saying that future contingents are true (or false); they can be true when assessed from a particular context. But if truth is indeed relative to the statement’s context of assessment, then future contingents are not special cases: the only sense in which any statement is ever true is that it is true as assessed from a particular context, according to this assessment context-relativism about truth.⁹

So not only does MacFarlane offer a solution to the problem of future contingents; MacFarlane offers the kind of solution we can help ourselves to in order to vindicate our knowledge of future contingents. MacFarlane offers us a way of meeting the truth-condition on knowledge: “The Man Who Will Get The Job Has Ten Coins In His Pocket” is true when assessed from a context such as a time *after* the CEO has offered the job to Smith.

⁶ Alvin I. Goldman, “A Causal Theory of Knowing,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 64 (1967): 364-65.

⁷ MacFarlane, “Future Contingents and Relative Truth.”

⁸ MacFarlane, “Future Contingents and Relative Truth,” 321

⁹ I should emphasize that my argument is conditional: I am not going to defend MacFarlane context-relativism about truth; I will just show what we can do with it.

What we end up with, then, is the extension of MacFarlane's relativism to knowledge attributions. As assessed from a later context, knowledge attributions which contain future contingents are also true. Suppose that tomorrow our conspirator targets the fourth vehicle in the motorcade, killing the President, who was indeed travelling in the fourth vehicle. Now we can say that our conspirator knows, today, that the President will be in the fourth vehicle, as assessed from tomorrow night's context of assessment.

Just as "There Will Be A Sea Battle Tomorrow" is true as assessed from a later context (tomorrow, in the midst of battle), in the same way "The Conspirator Knows That The President Will Be In The Fourth Vehicle" is also true as assessed from a later context (tomorrow evening while America is in mourning, say). The 'price to pay' is relativism about knowledge attributions (and indeed MacFarlane has independently argued for relativism about knowledge attributions¹⁰). But it is only natural to think that, if TRUTH is context-relative, then knowledge attributions will also be context-relative – at least if we think that KNOWLEDGE implies TRUTH.

So even though epistemologists might not be willing to concede relativism about knowledge attributions in order to vindicate our knowledge of future contingents, relativism about knowledge attributions simply follows from MacFarlane's general context-relative account of truth – as long as we are unwilling to give up on the TRUTH condition on KNOWLEDGE.¹¹

II

In this section I point to three important disanalogies between the context-relative truth of "There Will Be A Sea Battle Tomorrow" and the context-relative truth of "The Conspirator Knows That The President Will Be In The Fourth Vehicle." These disanalogies must be overcome if we are to successfully vindicate knowledge of future contingents.

First disanalogy

A later context of assessment is the *proper* context of assessment in the Sea Battle case, but it is not the *proper* context of assessment in the Conspirator case.

¹⁰ John MacFarlane, "The Assessment Sensitivity of Knowledge Attributions," in *Oxford Studies in Epistemology* 1, eds. Tamar Szabò Gendler and John Hawthorne (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 197–233, "Relativism and Knowledge Attributions," in *Routledge Companion to Epistemology*, eds. Sven Bernecker and Duncan Pritchard (London: Routledge, 2010), 50.

¹¹ There is an independent way in which assessment context-relativism about knowledge attributions follows from assessment context-relativism about truth: knowledge attributions are assessment context-relative simply because all propositions are.

MacFarlane does not talk of proper or appropriate contexts as opposed to inappropriate contexts. But the strength of his proposed solution of allowing for future assessment of future contingents appears to derive from the fact that the more appropriate context of assessment for a statement about tomorrow is indeed tomorrow. So that the statement “There Will Be A Sea Battle Tomorrow” is saying something about tomorrow and should be assessed tomorrow. But this isn’t the case for knowledge attributions that contain future contingents: “The Conspirator Knows That The President Will Be In The Fourth Vehicle” does not say something about tomorrow; or, anyway, it does not *only* say something about tomorrow. It says, importantly, something about today, namely that the conspirator knows, *today*, where the President will be tomorrow.

Here I don’t intend to look at the wider issue of whether the knowledge attribution statement is a *real* future contingent or not.¹² The important point is that, even if it is, it is importantly different from future contingents such as “There Will Be A Sea Battle Tomorrow,” because the knowledge attribution (also) describes today’s world.

Two points here: crucially, the statement “The Conspirator Knows That The President Will Be In The Fourth Vehicle” says something about today *and* something about tomorrow. So it won't do to only assess it from a present context. That would mean dismissing a crucial aspect of the statement: that it *also* says something about tomorrow. And we will see in the discussion of the third disanalogy that assessing it from a later context does not mean sacrificing what the statement says about today.

Secondly, talking of proper contexts of assessment and improper contexts of assessment (or, for that matter, of more proper contexts than others) betrays the spirit of relativism; we might be unwilling to accept a relativistic proposal in principle; but if we are willing to consider it, then we cannot also take an independent standpoint from which we evaluate the different contexts from the outside.

¹² What stand we take in that wider issue will also determine whether we think that Gettier’s “The Man Who Will Get The Job Has Ten Coins In His Pocket” is a *real* future contingent or not: Gettier’s statement, one could argue, contains a future contingent (S will get the job), but it is not a statement about the future (a time after the CEO has made the job-offer), because by then S could have taken the ten coins out of his pocket. So there are statements about the present which contain future contingents: knowledge attributions are one example; composite statements such as “The Man Who Will Get The Job Has Ten Coins In His Pocket” are another example. But whether we should also label these kinds of statements *future contingents* isn’t crucial to my argument.

Second disanalogy

In the Sea Battle case, the statement is true as assessed from a future context and neither true nor false as assessed from a present context. While in the Conspirator case, the statement is true as assessed from a future context and *false* as assessed from a present context: because knowledge requires truth, the Conspirator knows only if the statement in question is indeed true; but since the statement in question is neither true nor false, then the Conspirator does not know.

This is important because if, as assessed now, the statement “The Conspirator Knows That The President Will Be In The Fourth Vehicle” is false, then the Conspirator does not know, now, where the President will be; and it is now that whether or not she knows will make a difference to her plans. Therefore we haven’t actually vindicated our knowledge of future contingents.

But within a relativistic picture it is perfectly fine that a statement is false as assessed from one context and true as assessed from a different context. Also, that the statement is false as assessed from a present context does not mean that the Conspirator does not know *now*. The Conspirator does know now, as assessed from a later context. And the Conspirator does not know now, as assessed from a present context. So there still is a way of vindicating the fact that the Conspirator does know now.

Third disanalogy

If we want to say that the context of KNOWLEDGE corresponds to the context of TRUTH, so that the Conspirator knows as assessed from a later context because, as assessed from *that* context, “The President Will Be In The Fourth Vehicle” is true, then the context of JUSTIFICATION (and the context of BELIEF) must also correspond to the context of TRUTH. But it is not obvious that this will be the case: the Conspirator might be justified in her belief as assessed now and not justified in her belief as assessed from a later context, even if the President does turn out to be in the fourth vehicle.

Suppose, for example, that the source upon which the Conspirator had based her judgement later tips the Conspirator that the President will in fact be in the fifth vehicle. Then the Conspirator would no longer be justified in believing that the President will be in the fourth vehicle, we might suppose, because that source was her only evidence. Still, the Conspirator knows now even if she later changes her mind. But now we can’t show that she does know either as assessed from now (TRUTH condition on KNOWLEDGE is not met) or as assessed from tomorrow (JUSTIFICATION and BELIEF conditions are not met).

But while it is true that a present context of assessment is missing the TRUTH condition, it isn't true that a future context of assessment is missing the JUSTIFICATION and BELIEF conditions. Suppose that on Wednesday the President travels in the fourth vehicle. Suppose that at 5pm on Tuesday the Conspirator, having been tipped by an extremely reliable inside source, believes that the President will be in the fourth vehicle, and justifiably so. At 5.01pm, the source tips the Conspirator that, actually, the President will be in the fifth vehicle. So from 5.01pm on Tuesday the Conspirator believes that the President will be in the fifth vehicle, and justifiably so.

As assessed from a present context, we are missing the TRUTH condition, so that we cannot vindicate the statement “The Conspirator knows that the President will be in the fourth vehicle”; but as assessed from a later context (tomorrow after the President has indeed travelled in the fourth vehicle), we are *not* missing the JUSTIFICATION AND BELIEF conditions just because the Conspirator later changes his mind. If we are evaluating the statement that, up until 5pm on Tuesday, the Conspirator knows that the President will be in the fourth vehicle, then we have the TRUTH condition (because we are assessing from a later context); and we have the JUSTIFICATION and BELIEF conditions, because even from a later context of assessment the Conspirator was indeed justified in believing that the President will travel in the fourth vehicle – up until 5pm on Tuesday anyway.

Even though from Wednesday's context of assessment, it is still Tuesday up to 5pm that we are evaluating; so it does not matter that after 5pm on Tuesday the Conspirator is no longer justified.

We have now dismissed three attempts to show that MacFarlane's strategy cannot be applied to “The Conspirator knows that the President will travel in the fourth vehicle.” So if MacFarlane's strategy works for standard future contingents, then it also works for future knowledge attributions.

III

There are two obvious alternatives to applying MacFarlane's assessment-context relativism to future knowledge attributions:

- 1) dropping the truth-condition on knowledge;
- 2) rejecting the idea that we *know* future contingents;

Solutions 1 involves a project that is far too ambitious to be quickly resolved here. Solution 2, on the other hand, is pretty simple: all we need to say is that we don't really know statements about the future; and that when we do claim to know them (as we often do), we misspeak; what we should really be talking of are

predictions, probability, and degrees of certainty. Indeed, how can you know that something that hasn't yet happened and, in a genuinely open future, might yet not happen, will definitely happen? You don't.

I want to suggest some caution with this reply, on two grounds: firstly, the sorts of reasons for claiming that we don't really know statements about the future must not be only the same reasons supporting the indeterminacy intuition about future contingents. Because then we would end up defending the possibility of assigning the truth-value true (or false) to future contingents while at the same time rejecting the suggestion that we could then claim to know future contingents – when the only obstacle to claiming knowledge of future contingents would indeed be the truth-condition on knowledge. In short, truth must not be the only reason why we reject the claim that we know future contingents; otherwise we will have to drop the project of assigning a truth-value true (or false) to future contingents altogether.

Secondly, our reasons for rejecting knowledge of future contingents should also not just result from scepticism about induction. The worry with induction never was that I cannot know that the sun will rise tomorrow because it hasn't risen yet; but that the empirical evidence is, supposedly, not conclusive. And if it isn't conclusive, it isn't conclusive with relation to both scientific statements about the past and scientific statements about the future; with relation to both explanation and prediction.

This point can be extended to the justification condition in general: it looks as though we can be justified in believing a statement about the future as much as we are justified in believing a statement about the present or the past. The Conspirator's only evidence for believing that the President will be in the fourth vehicle tomorrow might be the very same evidence the Conspirator has for believing that the President was in the fifth vehicle the last time he travelled: a source from inside the office responsible for arranging the President's travel. So that if the Conspirator is justified in believing that the President was in the fifth vehicle the last time he travelled, then the Conspirator is justified in believing that the President will be in the fourth vehicle tomorrow.

People speak as though they know future contingents; instead of stipulating that when a person speaks that way they must be naïve, we have now offered a way to make philosophical sense of that form of speech. People speak as though they know the future; and, lo and behold, they really do.¹³

¹³ Many thanks to an audience in Dublin and to the following for comments: Paul Boghossian, Niall Connolly, Douglas Edwards, Richard Hamilton, John MacFarlane, and Conor McHugh.