

Non-Persistent Truths?

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Abstract

I argue that the semantic route to the revisability of the future indicated by Bonomi disappoints the expectations. Bonomi makes a lot of a confessed peculiar use of ‘no longer’. The use is indeed peculiar, not to say out of the question. Any statement of “The *F* is no longer *G*” is about a change in a subject. Bonomi sets up a scenario in which there is a change of subject and the new subject does not have the property that the old subject had. A scenario in which a statement at *t* of “The *F* is *G*” is true and a statement at *t'* of “The *F* is *G*” is not true. Ignoring that in the statement at *t* “The *F*” designates one individual and in the statement at *t'* “The *F*” designates another individual Bonomi wants to make a statement at *t'* of “The *F* is no longer *G*” into a revision of a statement at *t* of “The *F* is *G*”.

Keywords: Revisability of programmes and verdicts, Stability of truth and satisfaction, Doing something about the future versus changing the future.

1. Introduction

Andrea Bonomi’s “Non-persistent truths”¹ is a grown-up version of his “Revisable truths” (2016). Like its ancestor, the present paper is for me both heartening and disheartening. For if on the one side Bonomi has no doubts as to the truth-value stability of statements concerning the past, on the other side he is pretty convinced, and well set to convince us, of the truth-value instability of statements concerning the future. I will try in the sequel to show how to get rid of the delusive latter sort of instability. Before that, let me note that to proclaim the truth-value stability both for statements about the past and statements about the future is not ipso facto to proclaim the symmetry of past and future. Between the past and the future there is the hell of a difference that there is between having died and never being born, between having been the case and not having been the case. On the past there are records, memories, traces. On the future none of the above but only forecasts, previsions, hypotheses, guesses. The point is that this difference need not show up as a difference in the truth-value stability of statements about the past and the future.

¹ Bonomi 2023. Page numbers, example numbers and quotations are of this paper.

Bonomi thinks otherwise:

This idea of a branching future and a linear past is a kind of asymmetry which does not depend on philosophical assumptions about indeterminism (so that we can stay neutral on this point), but seems to rest on a distinction underlying the semantic processing of tensed statements, whatever we may conjecture about the nature of time (Bonomi 2023: 130–131).

I do not see how a branching (open) future could be independent of indeterminism and how the difference between the linearity of the past and the branching of the future should replicate in a differential semantic processing of statements about the past and the future. I shall hence scrutinize the putative examples of such a differential processing provided by Bonomi.

2. Change of Programme

Suppose that according to the programme of the tomorrow concert Bill Evans will play in a duo with Jim Hall. And suppose that tomorrow the programme is changed just before the concert (Bill Evans will play with his trio). Bonomi's contention (131) is that if today you say

(21b) Tomorrow Bill Evans is playing with Jim Hall

your statement is true, and that if tomorrow just before the concert you say

(22) Bill Evans is no longer playing [today] with Jim Hall

your statement is true.

Fine, but for the fact that Bonomi is willing to conclude that the truth-value of statements about the future is unstable as the future is open. It seems to me that in the imagined scenario the statements are not about the future but about present programmes, namely the programmes holding when the statements are made.² The programmes change from one day to the following and the two statements are both true since the first says that the programme on day *d* is a concert of Bill Evans with Jim Hall and the second says that the programme of day *d* is no longer, i.e., does not hold any longer. The first registers correctly the programme on day *d*, the second takes notice correctly of a change of programme. So there is no revision of truth-value. A revision of truth-value there could be only by making the second statement say that the programme on day *d* is no longer a concert of Bill Evans with Jim Hall. Yet if the second statement were made to say so we would have a revision of a truth about the past, a correction of the past.

The only way to make the statements (21b) and (22) about the future is to ignore their proposed setting. However, taken as statements about the future they are not both true. Assuming the latter is better off due to proximity to the event

² To make clear we are talking about programmes it would certainly help to rephrase (21b) and (22) as

(21b') Bill Evans is due to play tomorrow with Jim Hall

and

(22') Bill Evans is no longer due to play today with Jim Hall.

we have to conclude that the former is not true. For sure it cannot be the case that Bill Evans gives and does not give a concert with Jim Hall on a certain day. So again there is no revision of truth-value since one of the two statements has been false all along.

If we now come to a statement of (23) you make the day after tomorrow

(23) Bill Evans did no longer play [yesterday] with Jim Hall

the first thing to notice is that (23) sits well in the imagined scenario only thanks to the temporal indexical that I have contributed in square bracket as I have done with (22). With such additions your statement of (22) and your statement of (23) say exactly the same. We have to do with a change of programme in both cases. The only difference between them is that the first statement is about a past and a present programme and the latter is about two past programmes. Programmes have changed in the past as they will change in the future. By mistaking programmes of events for future events Bonomi reaches the faulty conclusion that the future is revisable.

3. Change of Verdict

It is perhaps worth reminding that by mistaking verdicts for past events it is no problem to reach the faulty conclusion that the past is revisable.³ Backwards looking verdicts and forwards looking programmes are both revisable. As the notion of a changing past rests on the confusion between true statements about the past and verdicts so the notion of a changing future rests on the confusion between true statements about the future and programmes. Verdicts and programmes are not true statements but endorsements of or commitments to the truth of statements. Verdicts and programmes hold until they are withdrawn. Truths, no matter if about the past or the future, are unassailable. At least until 'no longer' is put deceitfully to the service of a changing future or of a changing past. If anything, the improper use of 'no longer' at the benefit of a changing future is more treacherous than the improper use of 'no longer' at the benefit of a changing past. The first will more likely go undetected given to entrenched conviction that the future is liable to moulding in a way the past is not.

Bonomi qualifies the exemplified use of 'no longer' as very peculiar. Unfortunately he fails to spot the source of the peculiarity, which resides in a dreadful use of the innocent 'no longer' in combination with a troublesome time sensitive designator. To appreciate the point it will be sufficient to consider "Bill Evans is no longer ill" versus "The programme is no longer that Bill Evans will play with Jim Hall". Why the first is not peculiar at all while the second is? Well, there is a certain man that was ill at t and is healthy at t' but there is not a certain programme that is at t that p and that is at t' that $q \neq p$. Bonomi observes that 'the program is modified' to hence proceed from the instability of programmes to the instability of the future. We can avoid this unlucky step if instead of talking of a modification of the programme we talk of a change of programme, i.e. of the replacement of a programme (the yesterday programme) with another (today programme). As the instability of verdicts is no evidence for the instability of the past, so the instability of programmes is no evidence for the instability of the future. Verdicts are

³ See Barlassina and Del Prete 2015.

obviously about the past, programmes are obviously about the future. For some reason which deserves further investigation, verdicts are not perceived as obviously distinct from the past and programmes are not perceived as obviously distinct from the future.

To put it bluntly what happened happened and what will happen will happen. Such a bluntness may appear at variance with the common impression that there is nothing one can do about the past and there is, at least sometimes, something one can do about the future. I will not resist the common impression while resisting the suggestion that the common impression is at variance with holding that what will happen will happen. In other words I do not see any incompatibility between the inalterability of the future and the capacity to do something about the future. To appreciate the lack of incompatibility it is hopefully enough not to mingle doing something about the future and modifying the future. Doing something about the future is, if successful, forging the future, i.e. to make or contribute to make it the case that so and so is the case. To forge the future is to modify the present not the future. Modification applies only to the existent and the future is only bona fide existent. Even if at time t there are n possibilities at time t' following t only one is realized. The realized possibility, if a change at all, is a new present that modifies the previous present rather than any of the unrealized possibilities.

Even if you are an indeterminist bewildered by the abundance of forking paths and by the unpredictability of the future you should find comfort in the loneliness of the one present in which one of the futures is going to be realized. You could still be unconvinced and speculate that if the future is a mere possibility until it actualizes in a present so a statement about the future is neither true nor false until the future condenses in a present. This conclusion is almost inevitable for those who conceive of truth as correspondence to the facts. No fact no truth or falsity and hence no truth or falsity pending the presentification of the future.

The reasoning has some appeal to which we should obstinately resist. We word expectations, make forecasts and previsions and hypotheses. Many hypotheses are of the form if A then B where the telling case is the one in which A is the case. Yet the conditional is true or false when worded and not pending the actualization of A . Previsions and forecasts are correct or incorrect when made and not later on. Since for a forecast or prevision to be correct is no other than being true and being incorrect is no other than being false we could straightforwardly say that previsions and forecasts are true or false when worded and do not become true or false later on. It is quite another matter that their truth or falsity may require plenty of time to be ascertained or may fail to be ascertained for good.

Admittedly one could argue that impermanent truths (falsities) are well testified quite independently of previsions and programmes, i.e. of statements concerning the future. As it happens most attributes have varying satisfaction or if you prefer they are enjoyed temporarily. If satisfaction is truth of and truth of is unstable it would seem that the predication of attributes is bound to result in unstable truths. "Mary is young" is condemned to falsity and "Mary likes Marc" is prone to falsity in due time. Youth and love are as precarious as previsions and programmes. In fact most (state of) affairs are pretty precarious and doomed to change in time.

This said, it requires a moment's thought to see that the sentence "Mary is young" is doomed to the lack of a truth-value rather than falsity if not tied to a time. Only to realize next that sentences due to their abstractness do not make for

the best candidates to a temporal anchoring. That's why statements of sentences are preferable to temporally indexed sentences as bearers of a truth-value.

4. Persistent Truth of Statements

Temporal inflection is a way sentences give voice to changing events and states. Statements (of sentences) that are true are true full stop, no matter their tense is past present or future. Statements of sentences are particulars of sort, events of production of sounds gestures or inscriptions that enact a predication. All contemporary statements of one and the same non-indexical sentence share the same truth-value while non-contemporary statements of one and the same (non-indexical) sentence may have different truth-values. The difference is no evidence for the instability of truth or falsity. Truth and falsity of statements are stable. Statements of the same sentence differing in truth-value are different from one another in what they say. Truth is as any other property sensitive to the changes in the prospective satisfier.

Tom is tired at t and is not tired at t' due to changes in Tom. "Tom is tired" said at t is true and said at t' is false due to changes in what the two tokens of the sentence say. The statement on March 11 2024 of "Tom is tired" says that Tom on March 11 is tired, the statement on March 12 2024 of "Tom is tired" says that Tom on March 12 2024 is tired.⁴ Even if indexicality should be kept distinct from time sensitivity, time sensitive sentences and indexical sentences (sentences containing indexical words) are alike under two respects: one, only their tokens have truth values; two, when different tokens of the same sentence have different truth-values they say different things. Neither kind of sentences is a reservoir of non-persistent truths (falsities). If anything both kinds of sentences are a reservoir of permanent neither-truths-nor-falsities. And tokens of either kind of sentences are persistent truths or falsities.

Bonomi does not surrender himself to the comforts of persistence. He rehearses an old example of his (Bonomi 2016: 245) to argue that the idea of time anchored tokens required for persistence does not work. Consider the statements of the two sentences below, the first made on November 27 2011 when Italy was facing a severe crisis, the other one year later when Italy was not facing a severe crisis.

(27) Italy is facing a severe crisis.

(28) Thank Goodness, what I said one year ago is no longer true.

According to Bonomi "the comment made by uttering (28) can be plausible (and true) only by associating the expression 'what I said' to a propositional content which is *not* anchored to the utterance time of (27)" (Bonomi 2023: 147). I do not think that the comment can be plausible (and true). However, if there were

⁴ I am in no way suggesting that when the temporal inflection is the present tense the time relevant for the truth-value of the token need coincide with the time of production of the token. Examples of non-coincidence are not hard to come. To wit: "It is April 7 1932. Tom is tired" stated on a day other than April 7 1932 or "When coming home from work Tom is tired" stated at a time other than the time of Tom's coming home.

a way it could be plausible (and true), the association of “what I said” to a temporally neutral so-called propositional content⁵ would not be the only way. The association of ‘what I said’ to the words used in the statement would fare no worse. And, I am sorry to say, no better. “To say” is notoriously ambiguous between a quotational and a disquotational reading. “What I said” in (28) may well mention the sentence (27) itself rather than a propositional content. The *temporally neutral* what I said does not require any labour of abstraction but it is already lying there in full view. Yet not quite up to the task of making a statement of (28) plausible (true).

5. Delusive Neutrality

No neutrality is going to work. The propositional neutral content dear to Bonomi does not work if it has to be a bearer of truth or falsity. The sentence: “Italy is facing a severe crisis” is neither true nor false pending a temporal localization for the severe crisis. If you prefer it is neither true nor false that Italy is facing a severe crisis. It will surely be suggested that it is not a sentence but a sentence indexed to a (proper) time (of evaluation) to be either true or false. Unfortunately there is no way to recover a temporal index for a sentence unless a specific exemplar of the sentence is focused on. The time required for a truth-value of the sentence is no other than the time of, or the time recoverable from, a statement made with the sentence. The statement made with “Italy is facing a severe crisis” on Nov 27 2011 is true if and only if Italy is facing a severe crisis on Nov 27 2011. The statement made with “Italy was facing a severe crisis one year ago” on Nov 27 2012 is true if and only if Italy was facing a severe crisis on Nov 27 2011. In the disquotation of the sentence on the left, i.e. in the sentence on the right, the date is no index but a component.

A token is not temporally neutral. Sentences are temporally neutral, but they, whether containing a temporal indexical or just tensed, fail truth and falsity and do not acquire a truth-value for being talked about. It would seem there is no way to make a token of (28) true. Luckily so. For if there were something that was true and was not true the following year then the past would be revisable. We need not lose our sleep on (28). It is no more than an instance of the sloppy talk we can do without. There are smoother alternatives. For example:

(28a) Thanks Goodness, Italy is no longer facing a severe crisis.

I would stop here by saying “Thank goodness, ‘no longer’ has parted company with ‘true’”. But I have to consider further examples Bonomi puts forward to convince us of the instability of the future versus the stability of the past. The examples are not novel but for a detail: the instability of truth is brought back to the instability of truth of. The focus is not on the main predication but on the predication within the would-be argument-providing designator. The deployment of the examples requires a wishful historical scenario (cf. Bonomi 2023: 127).

⁵ I shall be excused for modifying ‘propositional content’ with ‘so-called’. I wanted to manifest my terminological discomfort. For sure a statement says something and two statements even made with different sentences may say the same thing. Even so I doubt that what they say has to be something over and above the referents of the words used and the way they are organized in the sentences. Further, (tokens of) sentences do not have content. They are not containers. Not even of the (tokens of) words they are made of.

- On June 27 2012 Sarah Palin is nominated official Republican candidate for the 2012 Election.
- On July 27 2012 Sarah Palin retires after a hunting fiasco.
- On October 28 2012 Michael Moore is nominated official Republican candidate for the 2012 Election.
- (13a) The person who will run for President in the 2012 Election is a woman
(uttered on June 28)
- (13b) The person who will run for President in the 2012 Election is no longer a woman
(uttered on October 28)
- (13c) The person who ran for President in the 2008 [2012] Election is no longer a woman
(uttered on December 28 2012, after the presidential election)⁶

6. Persistent Satisfaction of Predicates in Statements

Bonomi's contention is that in the scenario proposed the statement of (13a) is clearly true and that the statement of (13b) is true and, more crucially, is naturally taken to say that the present official candidate unlike the previous official candidate is a man. It is not taken to say that the present official candidate has changed sex. But, Bonomi urges, what the statement of (13c) would be taken to say is that the past official candidate has changed sex. Why? "Person who will run for President in the 2012 Election" is true of different individual at different times, while "person who ran for President in the 2012 Election" is true of one individual. The future oriented description has unstable designation while the past oriented description has stable designation (Bonomi 2023: 128). This pace Bonomi cannot be the case. By hypothesis there are two official candidates at different times and they remain two no matter if described as past or future. The person who ran for President in 2012 was first Palin then Moore. Interestingly enough Bonomi writes that "in such cases truth and reference do not depend upon the way the world will actually be, but upon the correct (appropriate) information, for instance, about the relevant nominations" (Bonomi 2023: 127), i.e., I would press, upon the way the world is. If so, the future tensed description is not future oriented. It is present oriented as it could be appreciated by rephrasing it as "the official Republican presidential candidate for the 2012 Election".

This said I would add that the perceived difference in the understanding of a statement of (13b) and a statement of (13c) evaporates if (13c), to do justice to the envisioned scenario, gets reformulated as:

- (13d) The person who was running for President in the 2012 Election was no longer a woman.
(uttered on December 28 2012, after the presidential Election)

However neither (13b) nor (13d) works if the description is considered as a designator of an individual. There is no individual who is or was no longer a woman. Not the woman designated by the token of the description on June 28 2012 nor the man designated by the token of the description on October 28 2012 or December 28 2012. The first is or was still a woman, the second is or was never a

⁶ I have updated the date from 2008 to 2012 and contributed the utterance time for consistency and clarity.

woman. ‘No longer’ (‘still’), unsurprisingly, is no good in combination with a time sensitive designator whose non-contemporary uses have different designation. No good at least for saying what the envisioned scenario was set up to make us believe, namely that a truth has turned into a falsity. Any statement of “The person who will be running for President in the 2012 Election is no longer a woman” cannot but amount, pace the scenario, to the disclosure of a change of sex.

For in any statement of the sentence the description designates the only official candidate at the time of the production of the statement. Of this individual the statement says that he is no longer a woman, namely that he was a woman in the past and is not a woman in the present. Similarly in any statement of the sentence “The person who will be running for President in the 2012 Election is a woman” the description designates the only official candidate at the time of the production of the statement. The tokens of the description in non-contemporary statements need not designate the same individual and in the envisioned scenario do not. Hence a statement on October 28 of “The person who will be running for President in the 2012 Election is no longer a woman” if true could not be a revision of the truth of the statement on June 28 of “The person who will be running for President in the 2012 Election is a woman” since the two statements are about different individuals.

7. Conclusion

Bonomi’s examples show, if they show anything, that temporally unstable truths (of) and temporally unstable designators are not the way to go.⁷ If the unsettledness of the future rests on the semantic processing of future tensed sentences or would be future oriented descriptions then we need not worry about it.

Although truths about the future are no more revisable than truths about the past or the present, historic revisionism is as well attested as predictive revisionism and present irresoluteness (Am I right?). All revisions irrespective of whether concerned with the past the present or the future are no more than corrections of judgments, the retractions of statements. One could still find bewildering that a statement about the future should be true even before something could make it true. I see no option than ridding truth from time. A statement is a particular in time, but even if time sensitive or time indexical says something time insensitive. My present statement of “My brand new smartphone will hardly be smart in five years” is true, not true now or in five years from now.⁸

References

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⁷ Time-sensitive truths (of) and designators are better replaced by time-tied tokens of sentences (predicates) and designators.

⁸ I want to thank Andrea Bianchi for his precious observations and Andrea Bonomi for his prodigal dispensation of food for thought.