

FUTURE CONTINGENTS: ARISTOTLE VS OCKHAM

B. SANJEEWA MAHESHE MENDIS

Department of Secondary and Tertiary Education
Faculty of Education
Open University of Sri Lanka
Nawala, Nugegoda
Sri Lanka

ABSTRACT

Future contingents pertain to statements about events and actions that have yet to occur, extending beyond the present moment. The significance of establishing a theological and philosophical foundation for understanding theories of future contingencies is evident. From a philosophical perspective, it can be argued that future contingents adhere to Aristotle's Principle of Bivalence. This principle addresses the potential truth or falsehood of future events, making room for either their realization or non-realization. Aristotle explored these contingents through logical frameworks involving time and potentiality. Theologians, meanwhile, build upon these ideas to construct their doctrinal foundations, often leading to tensions between philosophical and theological perspectives. As a result of these conflicts, the issue of future contingents has emerged as a central philosophical problem. Critics have identified logical flaws within Aristotle's approach to future contingents, offering interpretations that challenge his conclusions. These critiques suggest that Aristotle's framework does not provide a definitive resolution to the problem of future contingents. In contrast, Ockham's approach, recognized for its logical rigor, continues to be influential in contemporary philosophical discussions.

Keywords - future contingents, Aristotle, Ockham, causality, assumptions

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Future contingents refer to statements about events or actions beyond the present, raising the possibility that such statements could be either true or false (Iacona, 2014). The challenge surrounding future contingents involves determining the validity of these statements and justifying the events or actions they describe. Additionally, there is the question of human capacity to anticipate future events. This leads to various inquiries: If multiple decisions can be made freely regarding future contingents, which decision will ultimately be true? Are these statements definitive? Or should we dismiss such speculation, asserting that humans cannot predict future outcomes? Furthermore, is it possible to consider the future in its present form? What is the nature of the connection between the future and the past? (Todd & Rabern, 2021)

The problem of future contingents has been examined across multiple disciplines (Ciuni & Proietti, 2019). Fields like theology, philosophy, logic, linguistic interpretation, computer science, and applied mathematics have all grappled with this issue. In theology, this topic is central to discussions of divine prophecy, human free will, and moral accountability. Theologians have sought to create logical models of time and future contingents to reconcile these complexities (Todd & Rabern, 2021). Philosophical approaches, often in tension with

theological views, examine these problems from different angles. In logic, the relationship between time and determinacy is explored, with various models tested through hypothetical scenarios. Language, too, is scrutinized to determine whether expressions about the future provide an accurate representation. Additionally, temporal logic in computer science and applied mathematics plays a key role in studying future contingents and their potential outcomes (Brauner, Hasle, & Ohrstrom, 1998).

2.0 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research adopts a comparative and analytical approach to examine the philosophical debate on future uncertainties, focusing on the conflicting views of Aristotle and William of Ockham. Primary sources, including Aristotle's *De Interpretatione* and Ockham's *Tractatus de praedestinatione et de prescientia dei respectu futurorum contingentium*, will be analyzed to understand their positions on the principle of bivalence and its implications for the truth value of future statements. A systematic textual analysis will be used to identify key arguments, logical structures, and philosophical assumptions within each thinker's framework. Secondary sources, including contemporary interpretations of Aristotelian and Ockhamist thought, are critically reviewed to provide context and evaluate the ongoing relevance of these ideas in modern philosophy and theology. This research will also engage with theological implications, particularly Ockham's critique of Aristotle's argument for divine foreknowledge, using conceptual analysis to explore how each philosophical system addresses issues of truth, possibility, and necessity in the future. This methodology seeks to present a balanced and holistic examination of the logical, theological, and metaphysical dimensions of future events, drawing from both historical texts and modern scholarly perspectives.

3.0 IDENTIFY THE PROBLEM OF FUTURE CONTINGENTS

There have been various events in society. They are happening in the present and man is acting in anticipation of what will happen in the future. Various philosophers have made inquiries into such events because there is a human need for them. An event occurs randomly and depends on its possibility or impossibility. There are various events in society but not all of them are brought to the notice of man. Not every event in society is good for man. Its effects can be affirmative or negative. The reason for this is that if an event is not in a position to suit or affect human beings or to be of any concern, no attention is paid to it. There is a long history of such studies. It shows how human thought has made an in-depth study of events that can affect men from different perspectives (Tkaczyk & Wilczewska, 2018).

Human attention is focused on the contingents that may arise in the future because the nature of such events is not certain (MacFarlane, 2003). Man is fascinated by such events in which the mind is created. Such foundations are created in the human mind by inherent curiosity. Curiosity exists as a motivating factor, but not all future events are abstinent, with the implication that they have something to do with the past. So, he builds a causal relationship between the past and the future. In it, he finds some mental satisfaction with future contingents (Todd, *Defending The Open Future: Replies to MacFarlane, Green, Wasserman, and Bigg & Miller*, 2023). Such assumptions also give him a sense of satisfaction with the possibility or impossibility of future events. If the assumptions about future contingents are true in some way, then it is a supernatural state of mind, and if it is false, one obtains mental satisfaction as a faulty state of one's assumptions. In such a situation he gets rid of frustration (Todd, *The*

problem of future contingents: scoping out a solution, 2020). There are various theories about events that can affect human thinking. Some events can never be controlled by man, but he must face them. They are considered unavoidable events. These apply to the whole society or the individual. Some events are unexpected. Natural disasters in particular are considered in this category. It is acknowledged that survival or destruction or damage depends on nature. Other events are caused by other human activities outside of man, and protection from them also depends on the possibility. Finally, it is his job to protect himself from the effects of some of his actions.

4.0 IDENTIFY THE THEOLOGICAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL THEORIES RELATED TO FUTURE CONTINGENTS

There are two primary areas of focus when considering the problem of future contingents: religious perspectives and philosophical inquiry. While scientific causal viewpoints have also been proposed, their philosophical relevance is limited, as they are not rooted in human thought alone.

From a religious standpoint, different interpretations exist. In theistic religions, God or the gods are often believed to have predetermined all events that affect human beings (Knuuttila, 2011). One perspective suggests that individuals alone have the power to shape their destinies, a concept central to Karma. Karma can be defined as the actions or deeds of a person determining their future outcomes (Reichenbach, 1989). In Hinduism, the principle of Nishkam Karma Yoga further exemplifies this view (Shunmugam, 2022). Another perspective, found in Abrahamic religions, holds that while God created human beings with a defined lifespan, physical traits, and particular attributes, humans remain responsible for their actions (Gümüşay, 2019). Consequentialism, on the other hand, emphasizes that the magnitude of one's actions directly impacts the consequences for which individuals must be accountable (Guay, 2015).

In philosophical investigations, the analysis of causality and contradiction plays a crucial role. The doctrine of causation has long been accepted by philosophers and scientists alike, positing that all external events are foundational to human thought and knowledge (Iacona, 2014). Causation, as understood in this context, refers to the influence one event, process, or condition has on the creation of another. It is important to note that events are often influenced by more than one cause, known as causal factors. Furthermore, not all causes are immediately apparent—some are embedded in past events. Causality essentially provides a framework for understanding how the world progresses and is considered a fundamental concept (Taylor, 2010).

However, David Hume challenged this notion in his work *A Treatise of Human Nature*. Hume argued that when examined beyond human sensory experience, no inherent causes or effects are observable in events (Hume, 2008, p. 82). Humans, he claimed, infer causal relationships based on past experiences. Hume's inquiry into the origins of causal assumptions reveals that while present experiences may have been sufficiently explained, they do not provide insight into the inner workings or mechanisms of objects or events. The mind merely moves from one idea to another, without grasping the internal principles at play (Hume, 2008, p. 90).

Correlation is often viewed as distinct from causation. It refers to the dependence between similar events, typically between two random variables (Wang, 2019). In its broadest sense,

correlation describes the degree to which two variables are linearly connected. While correlations may exist in various societal contexts, they do not necessarily indicate a causal relationship. In other words, correlation alone is not sufficient to imply that one event causes another.

5.0 ARISTOTELIAN ANALYSIS OF FUTURE CONTINGENTS

Aristotle proposed significant philosophical concepts concerning future contingents (Aristotle, 2012). According to his view, events—whether past, present, or future—must either affirm or deny something, and thus must be either true or false (Aristotle, 2012, p. 9). When dealing with a pair of contradictory statements, if the subject is universal, one must be true and the other false. However, this rule does not always apply when events are not universal in nature. When the subject is individual, and the prediction concerns a future event, judgments become more complex (Aristotle, 2012, p. 9).

The reason for this complexity is that if all affirmative or negative statements were universally true or false, it would imply that every prediction about the future must either belong to a specific field or not. If one person affirms a particular future event and another denies it, then logically one statement must align with reality while the other does not (Aristotle, 2012, p. 9). This highlights the inherent difficulty in forecasting, as future events are not necessarily bound by the present.

Aristotle argues that if something is said to be true, it must necessarily be true. Conversely, if its opposite is not true, the original statement cannot be true either. Thus, a statement is only true if it has the inevitability of truth. Consequently, no statement about the future can be considered absolutely true (Aristotle, 2012, p. 9). However, this does not mean that such statements are entirely false. In fact, Aristotle suggests that future contingents still operate under the Principle of Bivalence, meaning that future events must either be true or false. Thus, any assertion or denial about the future must ultimately be either true or false.

Aristotle also posits that nothing happens in the present or future purely by chance (Aristotle, 2012, p. 11). Everything occurs according to necessity and is fixed. This is because the person who affirms or denies that an event will occur is either aligned with truth or not. If events do not happen by design, then it becomes unlikely that they will occur at all. Aristotle's conception of truth regarding present and future events is so far-reaching that it allows reality to be interpreted in two opposing ways. Therefore, if something is true, it must have always been true. Likewise, if an event is destined to occur, it has always been true to say that it will happen. Yet, if it is always true that an event will happen, it becomes impossible to argue that it should not occur, nor can its opposite be true (Aristotle, 2012, p. 13).

As a result, Aristotle argues that neither confirming nor denying the truth of any future contingent is entirely accurate. To assume that something will not happen without proof is an unsupported position. Even if one suggestion is disproved, the opposing claim does not automatically become true. Furthermore, if we declare an event to be both true and certain, it must necessarily possess those qualities. However, when predicting whether an event will occur or not, the element of randomness is eliminated. For instance, the prediction of a sea battle taking place tomorrow may or may not come to pass, but the necessity for it to happen

tomorrow does not exist (Aristotle, 2012, p. 9). This suggests that there is no obligation for the event to occur.

Aristotle's perspective implies that future events are not subject to necessity in the same way present events are. Thus, when there are genuine alternatives for future events—where outcomes may go in opposing directions—it is evident that both the assertion and denial carry equal weight (Aristotle, 2012, p. 9). This applies to situations where things do not necessarily exist or will not always exist. In such cases, one of the two propositions must be true, and the other must be false. However, it is not always possible to determine definitively which statement is true. Therefore, Aristotle concludes that while one assertion and its denial must be true or false, the rule that applies to present events does not necessarily apply to future contingents (Aristotle, 2012, p. 9).

6.0 ANALYSIS WILLIAM OF OCKHAM

Ockham, a Franciscan priest and a prominent Renaissance theologian, was also a pioneering philosopher of the middle Ages who strongly opposed many of Aristotle's teachings. As a Christian scholar, Ockham critically examined Aristotle's work, especially *De Interpretatione*, and identified what he perceived as problematic interpretations, particularly in relation to theological doctrines (Kaye, 2024). Recognizing that these ideas directly impacted theology, Ockham proposed three key insights to clarify the issue and offer a better solution (Freddoso & Kelley, 1998, pp. 246-249):

1. Every statement must be either true or false, without exception, and independent of any time constraints.
2. It is possible to express statements that convey mere contingents.
3. Every true statement about the past carries with it a sense of necessity.

Ockham argued that if Aristotle's dichotomy regarding future contingents were to be accepted, it would create significant problems for theological teachings. Seeing Aristotle's approach to future contingents as flawed, Ockham wrote a separate treatise to address its problematic aspects (Ockham, 1983). Ockham believed that Aristotle's teachings on future contingents conflated distinct concepts, namely passive fate and passive foreknowledge. Ockham used his theory of contradiction to challenge these Aristotelian ideas, questioning whether there is any genuine connection between predestination and foreknowledge (Ockham, 1983, pp. 16-17).

To explain this blending, Ockham references a passage from the Gospel of St. Matthew. He reflects on Jesus' response to Peter's claim during the Last Supper, where Peter declared he would not betray Him (Ockham, 1983, p. 37). Ockham suggests that, given God's foreknowledge, Peter's statement could have been either true or false. If Peter were to betray Christ, it was possible, according to Ockham, that he would not have done so. The reverse possibility—Peter not betraying Jesus—was also a protected outcome.

Building on this example, Ockham introduces a hypothesis about predestination, stating that if a person is predestined, they are bound by that fate. He then presents four hypotheses to support his argument (Ockham, 1983, pp. 45-53):

1. It is absurd to claim that if a person cannot be saved, they must nevertheless be saved by necessity.
2. The reason for this lies within the individual. Ockham explains that if a person has the capacity to sin, they are also capable of being condemned. Given this assumption, it is true that the person's curse is inevitable, whether or not their statements were heeded. Thus, their destiny, being truly connected to their actions, leads to their downfall.
3. Ockham adds that if the person's soul has not yet perished, it implies that the individual's curse is not permanent but only for a short time. In this case, the person is both cursed and predestined at the same time.
4. Finally, Ockham asserts that if the soul is destroyed, it is always true in the future to some degree that there is a connection between destiny and the outcome. Drawing from Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, Ockham states that "God has removed the solitude of war; if nothing else, it is still ongoing."

By constructing this foundation, Ockham offers his conclusion about Aristotle's teaching. He argues that the connection between predestination and foreknowledge must have been true at some point, because at some moment, the individual's fate became evident. Therefore, it is not necessarily always true that a person is predestined, nor can it be falsified by any external force (Ockham, 1983, p. 67). Ockham further elaborates that, "He is now cursed, so it must always be true that he was cursed." Consequently, it follows that it is eternally true that the individual was predestined and cursed simultaneously. Ockham's conclusion leads him to reject the Aristotelian Principle of Bivalence in relation to future contingents. According to Ockham, there is a genuine connection between predestination and foreknowledge, particularly when understood in the context of God's omniscience (Ockham, 1983, pp. 29-31).

7.0 CONCLUSION

Aristotle's interpretation of future contingents is rooted in a physical and temporal framework. According to Aristotle, if we accept the Principle of Bivalence, future events must be either true or false. However, the problematic nature of this interpretation becomes evident when he presents facts that conflict with this principle. Ockham, on the other hand, offers an alternative foundation that critiques Aristotle's view and exposes the logical inconsistencies that arise, particularly when considering theological truths. Ockham's approach involves a system that carefully distinguishes between past, present, and future tenses, with a particular emphasis on future contingents. His model asserts that the authenticity of future events is contingent upon time. For Ockham, the past is entirely fixed and true, while the future can only be discussed in limited hypothetical terms. This reflects Ockham's broader conceptual analysis of prophecy and foreknowledge, presenting a view of divine omniscience that has had a significant impact on contemporary philosophical theology. Ockham's analysis successfully identifies the logical errors in Aristotle's philosophical foundations regarding future contingents. His system is widely regarded in modern philosophy for its logical rigor and its challenge to the Aristotelian model. Ockham's view on future contingents and divine foreknowledge remains one of the most influential teachings in the ongoing discourse on philosophy and theology.

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