

## FIXITY WITHOUT NECESSITY?

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### Introduction

Discussions of time and fatalism often make use of the notion of a *fixed* event, or the idea that *the future* is fixed. One reason for this is that a fixed future is thought to imply fatalism and to play some role in clarifying and motivating this doctrine.<sup>1</sup> The notion of fixity is also brought into these discussions because it is thought to help clarify the apparent asymmetry between the future and the past. There is intuitively a sense in which the past is, and the future is not, necessary, though this is not supposed to be the standard metaphysical kind of necessity. Even if the past could have been otherwise, it seems there is still nothing to be done about it (and this is no less so than if the past could *not* have been otherwise). Some authors prefer, then, to speak of the *temporal necessity* of the past. But the notion of temporal necessity is problematic; it is not clear what it would be for an event to be temporally necessary. Thus, we might instead speak of the “fixity” of (past or future) events.<sup>2</sup> And there is at least *prima facie* support for taking the past to be fixed, where fixity is understood as a property of the past, or of past events.<sup>3</sup> For if this is so, then the fixity of the past perhaps might explain its *immutability*—i.e., the fact that the past cannot be altered.

Given its apparent explanatory utility and its bearing on the issue of fatalism, it is important to investigate the nature of fixity. The view that fixity is a property that may be had by either past or future events perhaps suggests that the notion of fixity is to be understood as *non-modal*. That is, it may suggest that fixity is not to be understood in terms of metaphysical necessity or in terms of related modal notions. For the intuition that the past is fixed is supposed to be consistent with the view that the past is not necessary (and also consistent with the view that the past is necessary). (Similarly, intuitions about the fixity or nonfixity of future events are supposed to be independent of the modal status of future events.) Again, though it might be held that while the past is not *metaphysically* necessary, there is nevertheless a kind of necessity that attaches to past events, it is questionable whether such a notion of necessity is intelligible. So if such a notion of necessity is spurious—if there is no property of being necessary, in the relevant sense<sup>4</sup>—then it may seem that fixity (assuming this notion is *not* spurious) must somehow be understood non-modally.

This paper is concerned with one recent attempt to establish a non-modal notion of fixity—that is, a notion of fixity as a non-modal property distinct from, and not reducible to, either existence or modal properties, such as metaphysical or nomological necessity. I will argue that the attempt, due to Joseph Diekemper,<sup>5</sup> fails. I will go on to explain that the notion can perhaps be made sense of on a modal realist branching theory of worlds of the sort discussed by David Lewis. However, I will close by suggesting that, in light of the fact that the notion of non-modal fixity was initially supposed to be intelligible in contexts in which no substantive metaphysical view about modality is presupposed, if the notion of non-modal fixity is to be viable fixity must somehow be understood as a form of metaphysical determinacy that is independent of the commitments of a Lewisian modal realism.

### Non-Modal Fixity: The Road Analogy

The argument that I want to consider appeals to a case in which a future event appears to be fixed even though it is clearly contingent. Diekemper suggests such a case may be found in David Lewis's discussion of the problem of change (or, as Lewis calls it, the "problem of temporary intrinsics"). This problem (and Lewis's solution in terms of perdurantism) need not concern us; the relevant point concerns Diekemper's adaptation of an analogy that Lewis uses in order to explain the concept of a *temporal part*. As Lewis explains, a temporal part is like a part of a road cut crosswise.<sup>6</sup> While the road may pass through Village A and Village B, some of its crosswise parts are only in A, others only in B, and others in neither A nor B. Similarly, Lewis explains, the perdurantist holds that objects persist by having different *temporal* parts at different times. (Whereas the endurantist holds that objects persist by being wholly present at more than one time.) Perdurantism thus corresponds to the way a road persists through space.

Diekemper wants to take the road analogy and consider its implications with respect to fixity and fatalism. He adapts the analogy so that it offers a picture of a one-dimensional timeline of static events. On this picture, one's "moving along the road" just represents one's subjective experience of the passage of time. There is, on this picture, no objective significance to one's location along the road; it has no bearing on the ontological status of the places that lie along it.

Diekemper argues that his adapted road analogy supports the view that the fixity of the future follows from its existence; thus the B-theorist is, in his view, committed to the fixity of the future.<sup>7</sup> For it appears in this case that "there is no getting off the road." That is, there appears to be no sense in which, if I am currently in Village B, I am able to avoid passing through to Village C. Thus it appears that the future event of my passing through Village C is fixed—it is not, it seems, *open* to me to avoid it.

Given a B-Theoretic ontology, the parameters of the road analogy are such that, i) it is impossible to get off the road, ii) it is impossible to stop moving along it, iii) the road is not under construction, but is complete and cannot be destroyed, rerouted, etc., and iv) it *passes through Village C at mile marker 30*. Thus the existence of the road in its entirety, and the existence of Village C at a determinate location on that road, ensure that I cannot avoid passing through Village C, regardless of whether I choose to or not.<sup>8</sup>

The road analogy is thus supposed to show that a future event may be fixed—in a sense in which its being fixed is an irreducible non-modal property of the event—even though it is not *necessary*. Does it show this? I will argue it does not. I will do this first by arguing that the thought *there is no getting off the road* implicitly relies on a modal understanding of fixity—i.e., an understanding of fixity as something which may be characterized in terms of necessity (even if it cannot be characterized as necessity).<sup>9</sup> Then I will argue that fixity, so understood, is either indistinguishable from existence (i.e., an event is fixed if and only if it exists) or indistinguishable from necessity (i.e., an event is fixed if and only if it is necessary). In either case, there is no genuine non-modal notion of fixity involved here.

First, consider Diekemper's response to the B-Theorist's appeal to the idea that although I *will* pass through Village C it is not *necessary* that I should (because it is not *necessary* that the road should pass through Village C). His response is to say that it is irrelevant whether the road *might* have passed through Village D instead of Village C. For the necessity of a future event, he argues, is not a necessary condition for its being fixed. ("I can acknowledge," he says, "that there are some possible worlds in which the road does not pass through Village C, and still think that in this world Village C is inexorable, and so fixed."<sup>10</sup>) Here Diekemper compares the apparent contingency of the fixity of the *past*, noting that it does not give us any sense that we have any power over what has happened or that the past is somehow not inexorable.

I acknowledge that it is tempting to think that there is a distinctive non-modal sort of fixity involved here. We may have the intuition that the future is, on this picture, *inevitable* or *inexorable*, where these notions are not here to be understood in terms of what is possible or impossible. I think this intuition is unstable, though. Consider how easy it is to shift from a non-modal expression of the intuition that, supposing an event *E* will happen (because it already exists), *E* is *fixed*, to an explicitly modal expression of the intuition, e.g., *it is necessary that E will occur*, or *it is impossible to prevent (or avoid) E*. It is not clear, then, that the intuition of fixity concerns a non-modal property of events. If the property of fixity were non-modal, then it seems we should not expect it to appear so easy to express the intuition of fixity in overtly modal terms.

This is admittedly not a very sharp criticism, but it is enough to get the dialectic going. The proponent of non-modal fixity will insist that the appearance of rephrasability is illusory and that the inclination to rephrase the intuition in modal terms just indicates a failure to understand the nature of fixity, or a failure to distinguish fixity from other properties that are associated with it. So the proponent of non-modal fixity might argue that while there are modal facts or modal properties associated with fixity, fixity does not consist in any such fact or property. He might argue that while *E*'s being fixed implies that it is necessary that nothing will prevent *E* from occurring, this is not what *E*'s being fixed consists in. Rather, *E*'s being fixed is what grounds the necessity that nothing will prevent *E* from occurring.

But if this is the idea, then we are owed an account of what we fail to appreciate when we express the intuition of fixity in modal terms. The road analogy apparently elicits an intuition about future events that may be characterized modally; if this is not the intuition it is supposed to elicit, then it seems the example fails to fulfill its intended purpose. On the other hand, if the intuition, expressed in modal terms, is *misreported*, then it needs to be explained why it appears that it is accurately expressed in these terms.

Moreover, we are owed an account of why the fixity of *E* cannot simply be grounded in *E*'s existence.<sup>11</sup> The proponent of non-modal fixity might argue that *E*'s existence alone does not imply *E*'s inevitability; but then it is not clear why *E*'s being non-modally fixed should imply this.

The difficulty for the proponent of non-modal fixity can be presented as a dilemma. The proponent must hold either that the fixity of an event is implied by its existence, or that the fixity of an event is not implied by its existence. If she holds that the fixity of an event

is implied by its existence, then the question arises, what does the fixity of an event consist in on this account, if not mere existence? Put another way, is the fact that an event *E* is fixed a further fact in addition to the fact that *E* exists? The proponent of non-modal fixity is hard-pressed to cite such a fact. On the other hand, if she holds that the fixity of an event is not implied by its existence, the question is raised, what in addition to existence is required, if not necessity? And in that case, how is fixity, so understood, distinguished from necessity? Again, the proponent of non-modal fixity is hard-pressed to answer these questions.<sup>12</sup>

### Lewis, “The Future,” and Indeterminacy

Let me briefly consider a different approach. In his discussion of the idea of branching worlds (i.e., worlds that have some common initial temporal segment, in much the way that Siamese twins have common parts), David Lewis questions what the branching theorist ought to say about “the future.” In particular, he asks whether the (modal realist) branching theorist can accept that the future is unreal, where this is understood as meaning that there is no *determinate* truth about the future. Lewis writes:

To have determinate truth about the future, it helps to have a future; but also, it helps to have only one future. If there are two futures, and both are equally mine with nothing to choose between them, and one holds a sea fight and the other doesn't, what could it mean for me to say that *the* future holds a sea fight? Not a rhetorical question: we have three options. (1) It is false that the future holds a sea fight; because “the future” is a denotationless improper description. (2) It is true that the future holds a sea fight; because “the future” denotes neither of the two partial futures but rather their disunited sum which does hold a sea fight. (3) It is neither true nor false that the future holds a sea fight; because “the future” has indeterminate denotation, and we get different truth values on different resolutions of the indeterminacy. Offhand, the third option—indeterminacy—seems best.<sup>13</sup>

Can fixity perhaps be understood as determinateness of denotation? Can the openness of the future be understood as indeterminateness in the denotation of “the future”? The proposal would be that “the future is fixed” is true in case the denotation of “the future” is determinate, where this depends on the non-branching nature of the actual world (i.e., the denotation of “the future” is determinate if the actual world is non-branching). So the future is fixed, on this proposal, if the actual world is non-branching.

But it may seem as though fixity is being understood in a sense in which the claim that the future is fixed is a trivial consequence of the claim that the future *exists*, so again we have the problem of distinguishing fixity from existence. If the actual world is branching, then “the future exists” is neither true nor false (because “the future” is indeterminate). So “the future exists” is true only if the actual world is non-branching, and thus only if the future is fixed.

But maybe the distinction can be drawn, after all. The modal realist-branching theorist might hold that “the future exists” is true because it is true on all interpretations or resolutions of “the future.”<sup>14</sup> Thus the fixity of the future would not be necessary for its existence: if “the future” is indeterminate, it remains true that the future exists, since on

every resolution of “the future” it is true that the future exists. This allows the branching theorist to distinguish the fixity of the future from its existence. And it allows her to do so without understanding fixity in terms of necessity. For, on this account, to say that the future is fixed is just to say something about the actual world—viz., that it is non-branching. It is not to say anything about what happens in other worlds, however close to the actual world they may be.<sup>15</sup>

This understanding of the notion of fixity also seems to make sense of the threat of fatalism that is often supposed to follow from the fixity of the future. If the future is not fixed, in virtue of the fact that “the future” is indeterminate in denotation, then it does not seem unreasonable to feel no fear or despair about what the future holds.<sup>16</sup> On the other hand, if the future is fixed, in virtue of the fact that “the future” determinately denotes a single future, then it does seem reasonable to worry about what this (single) future holds.

So, the proponent of non-modal fixity may perhaps understand fixity in this sense—that is, in the sense in which the claim that the future is non-modally fixed is simply the view that the actual world is non-branching.<sup>17</sup> In this sense, the claim that the future is fixed is not simply the claim that it exists; neither is it the claim that it is necessary, nor is it a claim that can be understood in terms of necessities.

However, the worry about such an understanding of fixity is that it would seem *ad hoc* to accept the modal realist branching theory in order to hold a non-modal notion of fixity, given the seemingly extravagant ontological commitments of the former. And though there might be some other theory that can make sense of this notion of fixity, it is not easy to see what it might be.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, the fact that in the attempt to vindicate non-modal fixity we seem to be driven to an elaborate position in modal metaphysics—whereas the notion of non-modal fixity was initially supposed to be free of any such commitment—suggests that the notion as initially conceived may not be what its proponents had thought.

### Conclusion

I have argued that intuitions apparently in support of non-modal fixity are covertly modal, in one or the other of the following ways: (i) intuitions of fixity are intuitions of metaphysical necessity; (ii) intuitions of fixity are intuitions of existence plus inevitability or unalterability. In either case, there is no distinctive non-modal notion of fixity in use. And while the account of non-modal fixity in terms of branching worlds may reveal that the notion is at least intelligible, this account does not warrant the use of such a notion in discussions of time and fatalism which do not rest on any such substantive views in modal metaphysics. In light of these facts, I suggest that proponents of non-modal fixity look further for an account of fixity in terms of metaphysical indeterminacy that does not rest on any such view. If it should turn out that such an account cannot be given, then we may be better off avoiding talk of non-modal fixity altogether.<sup>19</sup>

## NOTES

1. Fatalism is the doctrine that we are powerless to affect what will happen in the future, in the sense that we are unable to do anything other than what we actually do.
2. The difference here may or may not be terminological; it depends in part, of course, on whether the notion of fixity is to be understood in a non-modal sense.
3. Presumably, fixity would be an *intrinsic* property of events, though this will depend on the proper characterization of intrinsicness.
4. As suggested in Joseph Diekmper, "Temporal Necessity and Logical Fatalism," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* CIV.3 (2004): 289–96.
5. Joseph Diekmper, "B-Theory, Fixity, and Fatalism," *Nous* 41.3 (2007): 429–452.
6. See David Lewis, *On the Plurality of Worlds* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1986) 202–3.
7. I regard the B-theory as the conjunction of *temporal eternalism*, i.e., the view that all times are equally real, and a *tenseless theory of time*, according to which properties expressed by tensed predicates, e.g., "is past," are reducible to properties expressed by tenseless predicates, e.g., "is earlier than." I take it that Diekmper agrees with this characterization, though he does not make this explicit.
8. Diekmper, "B-Theory, Fixity, and Fatalism" 443.
9. The relevant notion of necessity may be metaphysical necessity or it may be some more restricted notion of necessity, such as nomological necessity.
10. Diekmper, "B-Theory, Fixity, and Fatalism" 443. Note that to acknowledge that there are *some* possible worlds in which the road does not pass through Village C is not to acknowledge that there are any *nearby* possible worlds in which the road does not pass through Village C. Thus the former acknowledgment is consistent with the view that the event of the road's passing through Village C is fixed only if it occurs in all (or enough of all) nearby possible worlds—that is, only if it is not possible that it not occur in every nearby possible world (excluding the actual world). Diekmper's claim is thus consistent with a modal notion of fixity.
11. That we are owed such an account may be especially clear in the case of past events.
12. In "Temporal Necessity and Logical Fatalism," Diekmper explicitly says that fixity is supposed to be a non-modal notion. And though he notes that it has modal ramifications—since it apparently implies *inevitability*, *causal imperviousness*, etc.—he claims these are not modal notions that can be expressed in modal logic or possible-world semantics. (See Diekmper, "Temporal Necessity and Logical Fatalism" fn. 3.) But whether these notions can be expressed in modal logic or possible-world semantics is irrelevant; the question is whether they *embody* modal notions that can be so expressed. Thus the notion of *inevitability*, as it is applied in this case, seems at least to embody the notion of (meta-physical) *impossibility*: an event *e* is inevitable if it is impossible that *e* could be avoided. Once this is clear, Diekmper's claim that it "matters very little [to the participants in the fatalism/anti-fatalism debate] whether the actual future is only contingently fixed (i.e., whether the future is not fixed—or is fixed differently—in other possible worlds), or whether it is necessarily fixed" is seen as contentious. For the question is whether the notion of *contingent fixity*—where fixity is understood as irreducible and non-modal—is intelligible.
13. Lewis 207.
14. Lewis remarks that option (3) "lets us talk in the ordinary way about matters on which the futures do not differ; what has the same truth value on all resolutions is determinately true or false." (207) Note, though, that Lewis does not seem to appreciate the implication of this remark, that while we cannot on this view speak of a *single* future, we can nevertheless hold that *the future* exists.

15. Except that they do not overlap the actual world. But this claim cannot be phrased modally. It should be noted however that there is a (weak) sense in which the claim that the actual world is non-branching is, after all, a modal one, since it makes sense only within the theory of modal realism.

16. Cf. Lewis 207.

17. Where this view is understood as implying modal realism.

18. We might try to accommodate the notion of fixity qua determinacy within an ersatz theory. Though there are well-known difficulties for such a theory. (See Lewis 142-65.) Whether these may be overcome is beyond the scope of this paper. But I want to note that if an ersatz theory can be defended (and made to accommodate the account of fixity indicated), this would not necessarily vindicate a non-modal notion of fixity. Such an ersatz theory carries its own peculiar commitments, and it may be that these commitments are excluded by our pre-theoretic understanding of fixity. However, I must leave this question open for further investigation.

19. A recent account of this sort is found in Elizabeth Barnes and Ross Cameron, "The Open Future: Bivalence, Determinism and Ontology," *Philosophical Studies* 146.2 (2009): 291-309. Their thought is that it is consistent to hold that future entities exist but that it is "unsettled" (i.e., indeterminate) which future entities exist. But note that even if this is so it does not follow that a future event that exists might nevertheless fail to be fixed. This means that if Barnes and Cameron are right to claim that the future may exist and yet remain open, then we must distinguish between the idea that *the* future is fixed and the idea that future *events* are fixed. Their account of fixity as metaphysical indeterminacy will not explain how an event might exist and yet fail to be fixed.