

PROBLEMS OF FRAMING: FATALISM AND TIME



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ABSTRACT

In “Fatalism and Time,” Mark Bernstein argues against the notion that the B-theory of time is fatalistic. However, when he frames the differences between the A-theory of time and the B-theory of time, I argue that Bernstein imports some troublesome conceptual baggage in the form of what he calls “atemporal truths,” which, in the end, dooms the B-theory to fatalism, the consequence he sought to avoid. From my examination of Bernstein’s framing of the B-theory of time, I suggest that, given the proper framing of that theory, it is not doomed to fatalism.



I. INTRODUCTION

“[W]e are all fatalists about the past... after an event has occurred, we believe that we can do nothing to modify or undo it.”¹ Most of us believe the future is undetermined, a blank slate on which we can write. If fatalism holds, however, it would follow that the events which constitute the future are immutable and that we are powerless to stop those events from unfolding. That is, we would stand in the same relation to the future as we do to the past.

In “Fatalism and Time,” Mark Bernstein seeks to prove two things. First, although it is often contended that the adoption of the B-theory of time results in an unwanted commitment to fatalism, the B-theorist need not worry about such a thing.² Second, to the contrary, the A-theorist ought to be concerned about potential fatalistic ramifications of the A-theory of time. While the A-theory of time holds that temporal becoming—the passing of an event from “being future” to “being present” to “being past”—is an objective feature of reality, the B-theory holds that temporal becoming is mind-dependent in some way or sense. Though Bernstein’s arguments on the interplay between fatalism and both the A-theory and B-theory deserve attention, in this paper I focus on his B-theory argument. I argue that the charge of fatalism against the B-theorist—which Bernstein argues *against*—can be *strengthened* using Bernstein’s own framing of the B-theory, which commits the B-theory to fatalism by accident. I then abstract from Bernstein’s framing to suggest that in order to avoid fatalism, we need to tease out new potential consequences of the B-theory for propositions and truths. In considering these consequences, we must ensure we stay true to the essence of the B-theory.

II. TIME AND FATALISM

The debate over fatalism and time ranges over different, albeit similar, subdisciplines in philosophy. Here I provide a background of both time and fatalism, so that the intertwined debate between both is more approachable.

A. TIME

In “The Unreality of Time,” a seminal piece in the philosophy of time, Ellis J. McTaggart asserts that when we speak of events in time, we seem to speak in *two* different ways:³

1 Mark Bernstein, “Fatalism and Time,” *Dialogue* 28, no. 3 (1989): 461–471, 10.1017/s0012217300015973.

2 Bernstein refers to the B-theory as the Non-Dynamic Theory of Time (NDTT) and the A-theory as the Dynamic Theory of Time (DTT). I will refer to them as the B-theory and A-theory. See “Fatalism and Time” for more information on why he makes this choice.

3 Ellis J. McTaggart, “I.—The Unreality of Time,” *Mind* XVII, no. 4 (1908): 457–474, 10.1093/mind/xvii.4.457. McTaggart uses the term “positions in time.” Bernstein speaks of “events.”

Way (1) is that we speak of events in terms of permanent temporal relationships (“earlier than,” “simultaneous with,” and “later than”).⁴ We say that event X occurred earlier than event Y. We say that this relationship is permanent because if X occurred earlier than Y, then the temporal relationship between the two cannot change. Way (1) may not make much immediate sense unless juxtaposed with what McTaggart considered way (2); the language used to describe events in terms of impermanent temporal attributes (“past,” “present,” and “future”).

In way (2), McTaggart noticed we say that Y was once in the future, is now present, and will recede ever-further into the past. At each point, Y has a different property: “being past,” “being present,” or “being future.” If X occurred in the past and Y will occur in the future, we can conceive that the attributes shared between the two will change once both X and Y are in the past. Namely, they will now both be past, as opposed to X being past and Y being future. If X will occur in the future at t_1 , we could say that X is past by t_3 . Thus, we can see what McTaggart means when he calls the attributes of these events impermanent—they are changing as time itself moves. It seems that X possesses different properties at different times: at t_1 , the property of being future; at t_2 the property of being present; and later at t_3 , the property of being past. Therefore, we describe events using impermanent temporal attributes whenever we speak with past, present, or future-invoking language.

For the sake of simplicity, McTaggart refers to indicators of time that imply permanent temporal relationships (“earlier than,” “later than,” and “simultaneous with”) as the “B-series.” He refers to these other indicators of time which imply impermanent temporal attributes (“past,” “present,” and “future”) as the “A-series.”⁵

McTaggart ultimately argues that since relationships do not change in the B-series—and change seems endemic to the nature of time—the B-series cannot possibly be used to speak accurately about the nature of time. He also argues that there are inherent contradictions within the A-series. McTaggart therefore settles on the conclusion that time is unreal since the A-series and B-series are *both* confused.

Some have challenged McTaggart on his willingness to throw aside the B-series, and others have found issues with his treatment of the A-series. But philosophers of time continue to argue within the framework that McTaggart supplied. McTaggart’s A-series and B-series

4 McTaggart, “The Unreality of Time,” 458.

5 “For the sake of brevity, I shall speak of the series of positions running from the far past through the near past to the present, and then from the present to the near future and the far future, as the A-series. The series of positions which run from earlier to later I shall call the B-series.” McTaggart, “The Unreality Of Time,” 458.

have morphed into the full-fledged accounts of the nature of time and the temporal becoming of events: the A-theory of time and the B-theory of time.

Within A-theorist thought, there is much nuance. For example, some A-theorists think that events are in temporal motion, moving from the future towards the present, into the present, and then receding into the past. Others think that events do not exist unless they are in the present. We can find similar nuances within B-theorist thought. A full account of these two theories will not be offered here, but the root difference between these theories is that A-theorists see temporal becoming—this passing of an event from being future into being present and then being past—as an objective feature of reality, and B-theorists do not. Instead, B-theorists believe temporal becoming is mind-dependent in some way or sense.

These different views of time have their various attractions. The B-theory seems best suited for understanding modern physics, but some claim that adopting the B-theory results in committing to metaphysical fatalism, a commitment which, some argue, can only be avoided by turning to the A-theory.

B. FATALISM

Metaphysical fatalism holds that everything happens out of necessity. There is no such thing as an open possibility. What will be, *must* be. What is, *must* have been. To call a proposition necessary is to say that the proposition's truth-value could not have been—and will never be—anything other than what it is. For example, a true proposition that is necessarily true can never be false. Likewise, a necessarily false proposition can never be true. All arguments towards metaphysical fatalism will therefore naturally converge towards the examination of two things: propositions and their truth-values. All the metaphysical fatalist must prove is that reality is necessary, that some propositions concerning the future are necessarily true, and that the future, as it unfolds, could not have unfolded differently.

III. BERNSTEIN ON FATALISM AND TIME

We are now ready to look at Bernstein's piece. I argue here that Bernstein's framing of the B-theory accidentally commits the B-theory to fatalism—the very conclusion he seeks to avoid.

Bernstein explicates the essential parts of the A-theory and B-theory in the same way that I have. He explains that the A-theorist thinks temporal becoming is mind-independent—i.e. an objective feature of reality—whereas the B-theorist does not. However, as he goes on to examine the potential consequences of

these theories for the truth-values of propositions, he imports some conceptual baggage.

Bernstein distinguishes between the A-theory and the B-theory through what he calls “internal temporal references” and “external temporal references.” An internal temporal reference means that a certain proposition is about a temporal relationship (e.g. Descartes' birth is earlier than Ryle's birth).⁶ An external temporal reference means that a certain proposition is true at a certain time (e.g. I am walking my dog and the time is t_1 , therefore the proposition “I am walking my dog” is true at t_1 . At t_2 , when I am not walking my dog, that proposition is no longer true).

According to Bernstein, both A-theory and B-theory require internal temporal references for coherence. Propositions with an internal temporal reference hold regardless of the time at which they are considered. But what about external temporal references? A proposition with an external temporal reference is a proposition that has truth only at certain times. It might make sense to speak of propositions as having an external temporal reference if “past, present, and future” are coherent ways of describing time. In fact, it seems the A-theory is committed to this notion of an external temporal reference. How do we make sense of the proposition “I am walking my dog right now,” if a proposition cannot be true at a time?

A B-theorist does not need to commit to external temporal references, because—under a B-theory—statements such as “I am walking my dog right now” might be misleading. They suppose a “now” or a “present,” and these concepts necessitate an external temporal reference. But a B-theorist is not committed to the notion that an event has an attribute of “nowness” or “presentness.” For the B-theorist, there is no proposition which necessitates an external temporal reference.

Above, I presented one way of showing why an A-theorist might have reason to believe in “true-at-a-time” propositions (what Bernstein calls propositions with external temporal references) on top of temporal relational propositions (propositions with internal temporal references). Bernstein argues further, and here is where he imports the most conceptual baggage. Bernstein argues that the A-theorist—in a commitment to external temporal references—is also committed to a notion of “temporal truths,” and that the B-theorist—with no commitment to external temporal references—is committed to a notion of “atemporal truths.” Here is Bernstein's argument that commits the A-theory to “temporal truths,” with some parenthetical explanation on my part:

6 Bernstein calls this an “atemporal fact.” Bernstein, “Fatalism and Time,” 464.

1. Temporal relational facts account for the truth of a claim. (e.g. “It is true that Descartes’ birth is earlier than Ryle’s.”)
2. It is possible that the claim’s truth-value may change. (What grounds this truth for the A-theorist—that Descartes’ birth is earlier than Ryle’s—is the fact that it is true-at-all-times, i.e., is true at every single “now.” It is conceivable that what is true at one “now” could be false at the next, i.e., the truth-value of the proposition can change.)
3. Only temporal entities can undergo change.
4. Therefore, temporal truths can be substantiated by temporal relational facts. (All A-theorist truths are contingent upon what is happening in time—in the “now”—even those propositions with internal temporal references. “Descartes’ birth is earlier than Ryle’s birth” is a true-at-all-times proposition.)⁷

Bernstein argues that a B-theorist is not similarly committed to this notion of “external temporal references.” He goes even further to say that while truth is temporal for A-theorists, it is “atemporal” for B-theorists. Truth lacks the possibility of change. For the A-theorist, truth changes with time itself. Bernstein claims the same argument showing that A-theorists are committed to a notion of “temporal truths” can be reversed to show that B-theorists are only committed to what he calls “atemporal truths.”⁸ Perhaps the argument would look something like this:

1. Temporal relational facts account for the truth of a claim.
2. It is impossible that the claim’s truth-value may change. (There is no such thing as a “now” and therefore there are no propositions which are contingent upon the now; the fact that Descartes’ birthday is earlier than Ryle’s is not grounded in the fact that it is “true-at-all-times” or true at every conceivable “now.”)
3. Only temporal entities can undergo change.
4. Therefore, temporal truths cannot be substantiated by temporal relational facts. (Truth is not contingent upon what is happening in time, in the “now.” “Descartes’ birth is earlier than Ryle’s birth” is an atemporal proposition.)

Bernstein argues that since the B-theory need not commit to external temporal references, it becomes meaningless to ask when a fact is a fact, when a truth is a truth. For the B-theorist, “truth must be taken out of the temporal realm.”⁹ Bernstein concludes: “Thus, whereas A-theory

is committed to the temporalizing of both facts and truths, B-theory is committed to their respective atemporalizations.”¹⁰ This is his framing of the two theories and their consequences for propositions and truth-values.

A. FATALISM AND THE B-THEORY

To save the B-theory from fatalism, Bernstein seeks to refute the following fatalistic argument:

1. B-theory implies that it is forever true (true from the first moment of time if there is one) that event E will occur.
2. We cannot modify or undo the Past (i.e., Past Fatalism).
3. Being able to make E not occur would entail being able to make what is forever true false (i.e. it would entail being able to change the Past).
4. Thus, if we adopt B-theory, we could not make it the case that E would not occur (i.e. Future Fatalism would follow).¹¹

Bernstein quickly points out that the B-theory does not imply (1) and that a B-theorist—being an advocate that an event cannot have the property of “being past”—would be unimpressed by (2).

However, I propose a stronger argument for fatalism against the B-theorist, using Bernstein’s *own* framing of the theory:

1. Truth and facts are atemporal.¹²
2. Only temporal entities can undergo change.¹³
3. Therefore, atemporal truth and facts cannot change.
4. Whether or not we know the truth value of the proposition, “Tomorrow, I will walk my dog before I eat dinner,” the truth of it is atemporal, meaning it cannot change. The truth of the proposition is therefore necessary. So, either I walk my dog before my dinner, or I do not; whatever happens must have had to happen.

This argument puts Bernstein in a precarious position. His framework for A-theory and B-theory—that A-theorists are committed to a notion of temporal facts and truths, and B-theorists to a notion of atemporal facts and atemporal truths—seems to have turned against him. He cannot refute (1) because he explicitly claimed that the B-theorist was committed to the “atemporalization” of truth and facts. He cannot refute (2) as it was used as a premise in his framing of the A-theory as committed to “temporal truths.” Refuting either (1) or (2) would undermine his framing of the A-theory, the B-theory, and the

7 Bernstein, “Fatalism and Time,” 463. Reconstructed from Bernstein’s argument.

8 Bernstein, “Fatalism and Time,” 464. “[The argument for temporal truths in the A-theory] can be applied to show that atemporal facts imply an ontology of atemporal truths.”

9 Bernstein, “Fatalism and Time,” 464.

10 Bernstein, “Fatalism and Time,” 464.

11 Bernstein, “Fatalism and Time,” 464.

12 Bernstein, “Fatalism and Time,” 464. This conclusion was essential to Bernstein’s framing of the B-theory. See footnote 8 and the corresponding text.

13 Bernstein used this statement as a premise in his proof that the A-theorist is committed to the notion of temporal truths.

tension between them. There is trouble here then, because (3) follows seamlessly from (1) and (2) and leads directly into (4), giving a surefire fatalistic conclusion.

I will now consider Bernstein's reply. Bernstein does briefly address an argument similar to the one I have made. In his rebuttal, he claims that

B-theorists would deny that atemporality entails necessity. It is quite correct to say that if a claim is true, it cannot change to false, but that it is true, is, in most cases, a contingent matter. So if it is true that [I will walk my dog before I eat my dinner], it is a mere contingent truth, contingent upon [my walking my dog before I eat dinner tomorrow].¹⁴

Atemporality, he tries to say, is "neutral regarding necessity." Bernstein might need to say more about contingency and atemporal truths, because it seems as if atemporality entails necessity. The truth-value of the statement "I am walking my dog right now" is actually contingent on what is happening now. If I am eating dinner now, the proposition is false. If I am walking my dog, the proposition is true. The truth of the proposition—a temporal truth, as Bernstein would call it—depends on what is happening now. It is influenced by what happens "in time."

Now consider an atemporal proposition: "I will walk my dog before I eat my dinner." Only temporal entities can undergo change, so once the truth of the proposition is conclusively determined, the truth cannot change—it is an atemporal truth to Bernstein. This sounds a lot like necessity. But what does "conclusively determined" mean? Bernstein most likely wants to say that, despite proposition A having an "atemporal truth," the truth of A is not determined forever. Once the truth of the proposition comes into being, it is unchangeable. There are two issues with this. The first is that "conclusively determined" might indicate an epistemic issue. Just because I now know that "I will walk my dog before I eat my dinner" expresses a true proposition, does not mean that the proposition became true when I walked my dog before eating my dinner. It just means that I received access to the truth of it. The second problem is this: if the truth of the proposition is atemporal and not subject to the whims of whatever is temporal, why would whatever occurs within time—walking my dog before dinner—influence the truth of what is outside of time? The truth of the above proposition, then, cannot change *no* matter what happens. That is certainly fatalism.

The framing of the B-theorist as committed to atemporal truths and facts desperately needs reform. It is clear that this notion has gone wrong somewhere. Can we really say that the proposition expressed by "Tomorrow, I will walk my dog before I eat dinner" is atemporal? What does it mean for the truth of a proposition to be atemporal? Are

we sure that "temporal truths" are inconsistent with B-theory? Further considerations are needed. It seems that representing the B-theory as committed to the notion of "atemporal truths" guarantees necessity and invites fatalism. Bernstein's framing of the B-theory therefore needs reconsideration, lest he bring the baggage of fatalism to B-theory when he attempted to remove it in the first place.

IV. WHAT WENT WRONG IN FRAMING THE B-THEORY?

Remember that the essential claim of a B-theory is that temporal becoming is not an objective feature of reality. Examining the consequences of this theory for propositions and truths—and thus fatalism—requires us to consider how our understanding of the nature of truth or propositions might be changed by an adoption of the B-theory. It involves appreciating the upshots of the B-theory for truths and propositions. It is in this application that Bernstein falls short.

How might we save B-theory? Let us revisit my argument for fatalism against the B-theorist (at least, the two most important premises):

1. For the B-theorist, truth and facts are atemporal.¹⁵
2. Only temporal entities can undergo change.¹⁶

It seems it would be easiest to take issue with premise (1). To substantiate (1), Bernstein provides the following argument (as seen earlier):

1. Temporal relational facts account for the truth of a claim.
2. It is impossible that the claim's truth-value may change.
3. Only temporal entities can undergo change.
4. Therefore, temporal truths cannot be substantiated by temporal relational facts.¹⁷

We might argue that (4) is flat-out false; there is no reason in principle why the truth of "I will walk my dog before I eat my dinner" cannot be a temporal truth. Instead, it might be a true-at-all-times truth. Yet Bernstein frames true-at-all-times propositions as being necessitated by the concept of *nowness*, something we know the B-theorist is not committed to. I see no principled reason, however, that a true-at-all-times proposition must be contingent upon the many "nows" that, for

15 Bernstein, "Fatalism and Time," 464. This statement was essential to Bernstein's framing of the B-theory. It is one of his conclusions about the B-theory. See footnote 8 and the text to which it corresponds.

16 Bernstein, "Fatalism and Time," 463. This statement was used as a premise in his proof that the A-theorist is committed to the notion of external temporal references ("true-at-a-time" propositions).

17 Bernstein, "Fatalism and Time," 463. Reconstructed from his argument on the bottom of page 463.

14 Bernstein, "Fatalism and Time," 466.

an A-theorist, comprise time. This would suggest that “true-at-all-times” propositions may be consistent with the B-theory, they may not necessarily suppose a “now,” and therefore may not belong solely to the A-theory.

This may be one way of alleviating the fatalistic tension in the B-theory Bernstein created in his framing. But in any case, it is clear that any framing of the B-theory which invites “atemporal” truths guarantees a fatalistic conclusion. Anyone seeking to exonerate the B-theory of fatalism should find reasons to reject this framing, and consider new ways to conceive the truth-values of propositions under a B-theory with the sole essential feature that “temporal becoming is not an objective feature of reality.”

V. CONCLUSION

I have suggested that there is an essence of the B-theory: that temporal becoming is not an objective feature of reality. In trying to understand the possible implications of the most elemental B-theory for truths and propositions, we must avoid adding more to the theory than is already there. This will hopefully prevent us from framing the B-theory in such a way that will ultimately doom the B-theory to fatalism. Inviting atemporal truths seems to invite fatalism, but given the proper framing, the B-theory does not have to be doomed to fatalism. The B-theory can be saved if we take more care when teasing out the consequences of the adoption of the B-theory for truths and times.



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