

Eli Hirsch, “Talmudic Destiny”

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This is a cool paper. Hirsch argues that Rashi holds an interesting and motivated alternative to the more familiar Aristotelian and Ockhamist views of the “openness” of the future. To be honest, I’m the kind of philosopher who has a hard time seeing what Aristotle’s problem was about the future (like Hirsch says he used to have a hard time). Since I have a hard time seeing the problem, I also have a hard time seeing how any of these three views would be solutions, and I also have a hard time seeing how they are *different* solutions. Maybe it will be helpful for me to just talk through my hard time in seeing this.

One reason I have a hard time understanding the difference between the Aristotelian, the Ockhamist, and view that Hirsch attributes to Rashi (I’ll just call these views A, O, and R) is that each of them is expressed using different terminology. O says that whether that house would be chosen by now was not *Settled* last week: last week it was *Possible* that the house would not be chosen, in a sense in which now it is *not Possible* that it not be chosen. A says: last week it was not *True* that the house would be chosen. R says: last week it was not *Definitely* the case that the house would be chosen. But what is the difference between these views?

One way of getting at the difference between these views would be if we had substantive accounts of what Settledness, Truth and Definiteness are, in some other mutually recognised terms. But O, A, and R don’t offer us much like this. According to Hirsch, “Ockhamists take it as given, as something not to be explained any further; that in a sense in which there are many possible futures there is only one possible past” (p. 30). As for R’s Definiteness:

I doubt that much can be said to define this notion. One can try to give examples, but probably the best example is the one we are talking about. An analogy can be drawn to a similar—and similarly difficult—notation used in quantum physics. Beyond that I think Rashi’s position invites us simply to accept this notion as the best we can do in framing the kind of explanation we seek (pp. 30–31).

(I'll come back to the analogy to quantum physics at the end.)

You might think that the Truth-view gives us more insight, since we have some idea of what that is. But it's hard (for me, anyway) to keep my grip on the view once we note that it denies that Truth obeys the disquotation principle. A house can be chosen without it being *True* that it is chosen. In light of this, I take A's Truth to be a technical, philosophical notion—not one that I have a grip on without explanation. And in particular, A's "True" sounds a lot like R's "Definite": lack of Truth seems to be some kind of deficiency in the objective facts (or "truthmakers", if that adds anything).

So let's see if there is something in what A, O, and R say *using* their respective notions that can make it clear what the difference is between being True, being Settled, and being Definite. For that purpose, let's use a neutral symbol " \Box " to designate whatever special status present and past facts have that future contingents lack—Truth, according to A, Definiteness according to R, Settledness according to O. We'll see if we can find interesting claims stated in terms of this neutral vocabulary, instead of each theory's special vocabulary, on which they disagree.

They agree on a lot. They all reject "bivalence", using this label for the general principle that for any P , either $\Box P$ or $\Box \neg P$. They all affirm excluded middle, and classical propositional logic in general—and so it follows that they all reject the principle that P is equivalent to $\Box P$. They accept one direction, that $\Box P$ implies P , but they all reject the other direction, that P implies $\Box P$. On the other hand, they all say P is not *knowable* or *assertible* unless $\Box P$. (Or at least, it isn't *presently*, *normally* knowable or assertible—maybe God is a special case.) This explains the paradoxicality of saying " P but not $\Box P$ "—despite the fact that on each view, this is something which could be the case.

They also agree on a lot about how this \Box -status interacts with time. Let's look at the case of choosing a house. (I'll call the house "H" rather than "A" because I'm using "A" to label the Aristotelian position.) They all agree that today \Box (H has been chosen). And they all agree that last week, it was not the case that \Box (H was going to be chosen). That is, that this house would be chosen was once "open", but is no longer. What is "open" changes, and generally decreases as more and more happens. So, in particular, we must be careful to distinguish these three claims:

- (1) It is now the case that \Box (H has been chosen)
- (2) It is now the case that \Box (Last week, H was going to be chosen)
- (3) Last week, \Box (H was going to be chosen)

Proposition (1) is accepted by all parties. (3) is rejected by all parties. As for (2), I'm not sure. If I understand Hirsch correctly, the second claim is where R parts ways with the other views. But I'm not totally sure if I understand Hirsch correctly. Let's look at a couple places in the text.

First, Hirsch comments on the A-position:

Suppose that, [H] having now been chosen, we ask whether we now know that [H] was going to be chosen. It seems that one cannot deny that this is in some sense known to us. But does this not imply that we now know that it was true that [H] was going to be chosen? Aristotelians must deny this. They would say that a prediction made last week that [H] was going to be chosen has now become true, but the prediction was not true last week when it was made. The sense in which it is now true that [H] was going to be chosen is that the prediction has now come true. But we cannot say “[H] was going to be chosen” in a sense that implies that it was already true last week that [H] was going to be chosen” (p. 24).

So, according to A, understanding \square as Truth, it looks to me like this says that A accepts (2)—it is now True that last week H was going to be chosen. (“It seems that one cannot deny that this is in some sense known to us”, and what is now known must be now True.) But also A rejects (3)—last week it was not True that H was going to be chosen. This looks to me like a perfectly intelligible and acceptable position, if as A holds, being True is something other than merely being the case. We just have to be careful about the scopes of boxes and tenses.

Immediately following this, Hirsch says “essentially the same distinctions operate within Rashi’s position” as in Aristotle’s (p. 25).

Now that A has been chosen it is definite that in a sense [H] was going to be chosen. But this does not imply that it is definite that it was already true last week that [H] was going to be chosen (p. 25).

But this looks to me like a *different* distinction. Understanding \square as “Definitely”, R accepts (1). But for R, “true” is disquotational, so the second sentence is just another way of saying “Definitely, last week H was going to be chosen”. In other words, it looks like according to Hirsch, R rejects claim (2), which A accepts. So this would be a way in which “Definitely” for R is *different* from “True” for A.

(I’m not totally sure I’m interpreting Hirsch correctly. Maybe I’ve misunderstood the intended scope in the quoted passage, or maybe “already true” is meant here to imply “already *Definitely* true”? Taking R as rejecting (2) also fits with Hirsch’s proposition 2 on p. 26, and other comments in other places about the “past future”. On the other hand, this reading seems to clash with what Hirsch said in the preceding passage about “Last week, H was going to be chosen”: “one cannot deny that this is in some sense known to us”—in which case it would have to now be Definitely true after all. Maybe the various uses of “in some sense” are flagging some ambiguity that I’m not picking up on?)

If this is what the view says, then it is a disagreement with A and O about a point of tense logic. A and O both say that whatever has now happened, last week was going to happen—being careful to distinguish this claim from the claim that last week it was *Settled* or *True* that it was going to happen. In other words, the principle says: if it is now the case that P, then last week it was going to be the case that P. R rejects

this principle—the principle is not Definitely true. That’s an interesting view. Note that it *isn’t* obviously a distinctive view about any of these “boxy” notions of Truth or Definiteness or Settledness. It seems to be just a disagreement about what was the case last week—what last week was like. The only place that Definiteness comes in is in how R rejects the principle: not by saying it is *false*, but denying that it is *Definite*. But if we ignore the question of “Definiteness” we still have a principle of “pure” tense logic that evidently A and O accept which R does not accept.

What is supposed to be distinctive about R is that R takes Definiteness to be a matter of objective indeterminacy. I don’t have a good handle, though, on how this conception is connected to this question about tense logic. The argument seems to go: if Definiteness is a matter of there being an “objective muddle” in how things are, then this is some sense a permanent feature of what things are like at a time. “I cannot see how what happens today can un-muddle the future-tense facts of last week” (p. 26).

... Rashi’s position says that if there was no definite truth last week whether [H] was going to be chosen, it makes no sense to say that it has become definite today that it was true last week that [H] was going to be chosen.

That is: if it was not the case last week that $\Box(\text{H was going to be chosen})$, then it is not now the case that $\Box(\text{last week, H was going to be chosen})$. Contrapositively, (2) implies (3). Since all parties reject (3), we are motivated to reject (2).

I find this motivation elusive. For one, I’m not sure why “muddles in the world” should have a stronger kind of permanence than Settledness or Truth. I’m not sure why the “permanence” of objective muddles isn’t captured instead by the weaker principle that if last week it was the case that $\neg\Box P$, then it is still now the case that last week, $\neg\Box P$. That is, I don’t really see why the indefiniteness gets to be exported from last week. Maybe we can discuss this more.

But anyway, I do think I have a handle now on two interestingly different views of time and “openness” here. One says that (1) and (2) go together, and come apart from (3). This is how Hirsch understands both A and O, I think. The other says that (2) and (3) go together, and come apart from (1), and I think this is how Hirsch understands R. Maybe I’ll just leave things there for now.

I’ve already written too much, but I can’t resist making a quick remark about the analogy to quantum physics. I get the temptation to look there for objective indefiniteness—a “muddle in the world” as opposed to our own muddleheadedness—especially if you look at the way 20th century physicists often talk about the theory. But meta-physical interpretation of quantum mechanics has come a long way from Copenhagen. As I understand it, there are three leading interpretations of quantum mechanics: collapse theories (like GRW), the de Broglie-Bohm “pilot wave” interpretation, and the Everettian “many worlds” interpretation. And I don’t really think any of them help us very much to get a clearer grasp on a conception of “indeterminacy in

the world” that is going to be very helpful in understanding the openness of the future. Rather, on all three of these views a “superposition state” turns out to be a perfectly definite way for the world to be, but which leaves the application of concepts like precise location or spin unsettled in some respect—because it turns out that precise locations or spins aren’t genuine objective features of physical reality after all. (But the details are different in each case). This looks to me a lot more like “muddleheadedness” than “muddleworldedness”. But this is obviously a very sketchy comment—I’ll just leave this point open for discussion.