

Lampert on the Fixity of the Past

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Abstract: In ‘A Puzzle about the Fixity of the Past’, Fabio Lampert argues that the principle of the fixity of the past is at odds with standard views about knowledge and the semantics for ‘actually’. In this paper, we show that Lampert’s argument fails because of its use of the material conditional.

Keywords: Material conditional; fixity of the past; free will; fatalism.

I

Fabio Lampert (2022) endorses an argument intended to undermine the principle of the fixity of the past. This principle is formulated thus:

(FP) For any action ϕ , agent S , times t and t' (where $t \leq t'$) and possible world w , S is able at t to ϕ at t' in w only if there is

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a possible world w' with the same past as that of w up to t in which $S \phi$ -s at t' . (Lampert 2022, 426)

This principle plays an important role in standard fatalist and incompatibilist arguments for the conclusion that we are not free, where freedom is understood as the ability to do or to have done otherwise.

II

What then is Lampert's argument? He writes:

Let ' \Box ', ' A ' and ' K ' stand for 'necessarily', 'actually' and 'it was, is or will be known that', respectively, while ' \supset ' is the material conditional.

Then:

- (1) $q \supset ((q \supset p) \supset p)$
- (2) $Ap \supset \Box Ap$
- (3) $\Box(Kp \supset p)$; so
- (4) $Ap \supset \Box(K(Ap \supset p) \supset p)$. (Lampert 2022, 426)

III

That is his main argument, but it is then applied to a particular example in which the following three propositions are assumed to be true:

- (5) S actually ϕ -s at t'' .
- (6) S is able at t' to not ϕ at t'' .
- (7) It was known that (S actually ϕ -s at t'' only if S ϕ -s at t'') at t .

From (4) and (5) we can derive:

- (8) Necessarily, if it was, is or will be known that (S actually ϕ -s at t'' only if S ϕ -s at t''), then S ϕ -s at t'' .

Then, from (FP) and (6), (9) follows:

- (9) There is a possible world w' with the same past as that of the actual world up to t' in which S does not ϕ at t'' .

(9) implies:

- (10) It is not the case that S ϕ -s at t'' in w' .

From (7) and (9), and since w' and the actual world share the same past up to t' , it follows that:

- (11) It was known that (S actually ϕ -s at t'' only if S ϕ -s at t'') at t in w' .

(11) implies:

- (12) It was, is or will be known that (S actually ϕ -s at t'' only if S ϕ -s at t'') in w' .

Finally:

- (13) S ϕ -s at t'' in w' .

follows from (8) and (12), contradicting (10).

Lampert claims that “We have thus arrived at a contradiction given (FP), (4) and the trio (5), (6) and (7)” (2022, 428).

IV

Obviously, since (5), (6) and (7) frame our example, (FP) is threatened if (8) was soundly derived. But plainly it was not since it is clearly false. As Lampert concedes, (contingent yet *a priori*) conditionals of the form $Ap \supset p$ are *true whatever p's truth value* (Lampert 2022, 427; 432; 433n6). Even if p is false, it is true that $Ap \supset p$. But how then can (8) be true? How can my knowledge that $Ap \supset p$ imply p if that knowledge is compatible with p 's falsity?

Something has gone wrong. But what? Note that it is always potentially worrying when a philosophical argument, as opposed to an argument in a logic textbook, makes use of the material conditional. Any such argument

will be of limited or zero interest if it exploits logical features of the material conditional, which intuitively diverge from those of the (natural language) indicative conditional. And so it is here.

(1) is a classical tautology but, intuitively, its natural language counterparts are not. Consider this example:

- (1a) IF Trump wins, THEN if Trump wins then Trump loses, then Trump loses.

It is reasonable to regard (1a), not just as something that no one in their right mind would assert, but as plain false (or anyway untrue).

V

We are thus in a rather curious situation. There is nothing wrong with the (1) – (4) argument, given the rules governing ‘ \supset ’. But if the indicative is not material, then Lampert’s argument is merely a technical exercise that fails to validate (8), which is formulated using the English indicative. The only conclusion to be drawn, if we are happy with the English variants of (2) and (3) – ‘if Ap then necessarily Ap’ and ‘Necessarily if Kp then p’ – is that Lampert’s argument is further proof that the indicative conditional is not material.

Reference

Lampert, Fabio. 2022. “A Puzzle about the Fixity of the Past.” *Analysis*, 82(3): 426-434. <https://doi.org/10.1093/analys/anab092>