

Eternalism and Presentism

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1. Eternalism versus presentism: the general idea

Eternalism: Past, present and future are all equally real. Dinosaurs and next weeks' newspapers are just as real as anything is.

Presentism: Only the present is real. Dinosaurs are unreal, just like unicorns. (Although most presentists would agree that there once were dinosaurs, whereas there never were any unicorns.) 'Whatever *is*, is *now*.'

There is also a third view, sometimes known as the 'growing block' view, according to which the past and the present are real, but the future is unreal. We won't be talking much about this view.

2. Two senses of the present tense

Everyone agrees that there is one way of understanding sentences involving the grammatical present tense on which 'now' can be added redundantly. On this reading, 'John is a philosopher' is equivalent to 'John is a philosopher now'; 'Some animals are dinosaurs' is equivalent to 'Some animals are dinosaurs now'; etc.

When eternalists say things like 'there are dinosaurs', they don't mean to be understood in this way—otherwise, they would be committed to the bizarre claim that there are dinosaurs now!

Rather, eternalists claim that there is a *different* way of understanding present tense sentences: the 'timeless' present tense, as it is sometimes called. When they say 'There are dinosaurs' (or 'dinosaurs are real'), they mean to be using the present tense in this way. Some possible examples of the timeless present tense:

All men are mortal.

Julius Caesar is the greatest soldier who ever lived.

Some Kings of France are very interesting.

To every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction.

Presentists can respond to this in either of two ways. They can deny that there is any such way of understanding these present tense sentences, claiming not to understand how the sentence 'there are dinosaurs, although there are no dinosaurs now' could fail to be blatantly contradictory. Alternatively, they can accept that there is such a thing as the timeless present, and advance the claim 'whatever is, is now' as a non-trivial philosophical thesis.

3. The indexical analysis of tense

Many—but not all!—eternalists subscribe to what I will call *indexicalism*: the view that the word ‘now’ behaves in the same general way as the word ‘here’.

A token of the sentence ‘there are dinosaurs here’ which is produced in place p is true just in case some dinosaurs are located in place p .

Likewise, according to indexicalism, a token of the sentence ‘there are dinosaurs now’ which is produced at time t is true just in case some dinosaurs are located at time t . (The same goes of course for uses of the sentence ‘there are dinosaurs’ on which it is equivalent to ‘there are dinosaurs now’.)

These truth-conditions can be extended in a natural way to the past and future tenses. A token of ‘There were dinosaurs’ (or ‘there are dinosaurs in the past’) produced at t is true iff some dinosaurs are located before t . A token of ‘There will be dinosaurs’ (or ‘there are dinosaurs in the future’) produced at t is true iff some dinosaurs are located after t .

4. Presentism and ‘here-ism’

To someone who believes the indexical analysis of ‘now’, presentism will seem as strange as ‘here-ism’, the view that everything there is exists *here*. (Where, exactly? Let’s say New York City, for the sake of definiteness.)

The indexical analyses of the past and future tenses entails that ‘there were dinosaurs’ can be true only if there *are* dinosaurs, unrestrictedly speaking. If we believed these analyses, we would take presentism to entail ‘everything has come into existence this very instant, and will no longer exist after this instant’.

This is a bizarre claim indeed. But of course presentists have not wanted to accept it: instead, they deny indexicalism.

5. Presentists and tense

What positive theory of the meaning of tensed utterances can presentists give?

Many presentists have attempted to shed light on tense in natural language by translating natural language sentences into a “regimented” language in which tense is expressed by *operators* which attach to sentences. A few examples should convey the idea:

‘Dinosaurs walked the earth’	->	WAS (Dinosaurs walk the earth)
‘The meek shall inherit the earth’	->	WILL (The meek inherit the earth)
‘In the future, some youthful-looking people will previously have been old-looking.’	->	WILL (x (x is youthful-looking and WAS (x is old-looking)))

'In 10 years, I will be a millionaire' -> WILL_{10 years} (I am a millionaire)

But this regimentation doesn't tell us anything at all about the meaning of 'WAS', 'WILL', 'WILL_{10 years}', etc.

Some presentists say: nothing helpful could be said here: these notions are *primitive* and cannot be further explained.

6. Eternalism and Fatalism: a red herring

Many people assume that there is some problem reconciling eternalism with "free will" or our ability to do things we don't in fact do.

Maybe they are thinking about some argument along the following lines:

If eternalism is true, then a million years ago, it was already the case that my son exists (timelessly speaking).

I never have any control over how things are a million years ago.

Therefore, if eternalism is true I never have any control over whether my son exists (timelessly speaking).

In my view, this argument is a complete red herring. Note first that a very similar argument can be constructed without presupposing eternalism:

A million years ago, it was already the case that my son was going to exist a million years hence.

I never have any control over how things are a million years ago.

Therefore, I never have any control over whether my son exists now.