Eternalism and Presentism: some a priori arguments
November 11th, 2002

1. Does eternalism lead to fatalism?

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 have never had any control over what was the case a million years ago.
> Therefore, if eternalism is true I have never had any control over whether my son exists (timelessly speaking).

One puzzle raised by this argument concerns the interpretation of sentences like 'A million years ago, it was the case that my son exists (timelessly speaking)'. We know what to make of 'A million years ago, it was the case that my son exists'---more colloquially, 'A million years ago, my son existed'---but this is false according to the eternalist. But what meaning can the operator 'a million years ago' have on a sentence in the *timeless* present tense?

Leaving that aside, consider an argument for fatalism that does not depend on eternalism:

> A million years ago, it was already the case that my son was going to exist a million years hence.
> I have never had any control over what was the case a million years ago.
> Therefore, I have never had any control over whether my son exists now.

Some have responded to this argument by giving up the first premise. They claim that the future is "open": certain claims about what will happen are neither true nor false (e.g. the claim that I will have raisin bran for breakfast tomorrow); likewise, yesterday, certain claims about how things were going to be today were neither true nor false.

> This is a truly radical view. Surely if X says 'Dorr will have raisin bran for breakfast tomorrow' and Y says 'Dorr will not have raisin bran for breakfast tomorrow', one of them must be speaking the truth (even if he has no good *reason* for making the claim)!

> It is hard to see how this radical view could be combined with eternalism!

The standard response (nowadays) to the argument is to deny the second premise: I had control over whether Oscar exists, and as a result I have control over whether, a million years ago, it was the case that Oscar would exist a million years hence. What I have no control over is what the past was like *in itself*; but I do have control over whether (as the eternalist would put it)

the past has the *relational* feature of being followed by a future of such and such sort. The claim that a million years ago, Oscar was going to exist a million years hence is just a disguised version of the claim that Oscar exists now: hence, it's OK to say that I once had control over the truth value of that claim.

If this response to the general argument for fatalism is good, it can also be used to block the argument from eternalism to fatalism. The eternalist can say: 'I have never had any control over what the distant past was like *in itself*; but I have had control over whether it has the feature *being such that Oscar exists*: the claim that a million years ago, it was already the case that Oscar exists (timelessly speaking) is just a disguised version of the claim that Oscar exists (timelessly speaking).'

2.   The 'truthmaker' objection

Consider the presentist's claim WAS(There are dinosaurs): call this claim D. Surely this claim could have been false even if everything that *now* exists had been exactly the way it actually is: the truth value of D doesn't depend (supervene) on the way things are now. (Think of a Russell world where everything popped into existence 5 minutes ago...) But if presentism is true, this means the truth value of D doesn't depend on the way things are, full stop.

A principle endorsed by both Sider and Bigelow: 'truth supervenes on being': 'What is true depends on what objects exist, what properties those objects have, and what relations they stand in.'

There's a *prima facie* conflict between this principle and presentism. But there are various strategies the presentist might use to argue that there is no conflict, really:

- The fact that WAS(There are dinosaurs) depends on the fact that the proposition that there were dinosaurs has the property of being true. (Bigelow, the Stoics).
- The fact that WAS(There are dinosaurs) depends on the fact that certain regions of space have the property of having once contained dinosaurs (Lucretius, according to Bigelow).
- The fact that WAS(There are dinosaurs) depends on the fact that the World has the property of having once contained dinosaurs (Bigelow).
- The fact that WAS(There are dinosaurs) depends on the fact that the proposition that there are dinosaurs has the property of having once been true.

Sider points out that if we accept any of these attempted resolutions, the principle that truth supervenes on being will effectively have been trivialised. He attempts to restate the principle in a way that will resist such trivialisation: 'What is true depends on what objects exist, what *categorical*

properties those objects have, and what *categorical* relations they stand in'—where a categorical property is one that 'does not point beyond itself'.

3. Cross-temporal relations

> Prince Charles is a descendent of Muhammed.
> Muhammed does not exist at present.
> Therefore, Prince Charles is a descendent of something that does not exist at present.
> Therefore, there is something that does not exist at present.

How might the presentist respond to this argument?

> It won't do to say: 'The first premise is strictly speaking true: what's true is that Prince Charles *was* a descendent of Muhammed'. The problem is that Muhammed and Prince Charles never existed together. So if we say 'Prince Charles was a descendent of Muhammed when Muhammed existed', we'll be led by parallel reasoning to say 'Muhammed once had a descendent who didn't then exist', and hence 'There once was something that didn't then exist', hence 'Presentism once was false'. But surely presentism, if true, is necessarily true, and hence always has been and always will be true.

I'm not sure what the presentist should say about this argument. But the case is tricky. The presentist can point out that anyone who holds that everything that *is exists* must find some flaw in the following argument:

> Many children are obsessed with Santa Claus.
> Therefore, many children are obsessed with something that does not exist, and never has existed or will exist.
> Therefore, there is something that does not exist, never has existed and never will exist.

Maybe if we find the flaw in this argument, we can claim that the argument against presentism has a corresponding flaw.

4. Cross-temporal causal relations

Another argument, similar to the last one:

> The cause of the current decline of the stock market is the Republicans' tax cut.
> The Republicans' tax cut does not exist at present.
> Therefore, the cause of the current decline of the stock market is something that does not exist at present.
> Therefore, there is something that does not exist at present.

One fairly straightforward strategy for the presentist to use with this argument is to say that the first premise is not strictly true (there is no such thing as *the Republicans' tax cut*); rather, what is true is this:

The stock market is declining BECAUSE the Republicans cut taxes.

In 'Presentism and Properties', Bigelow attributes to the Stoics the strange-sounding view that causal relations hold among true propositions, so that for example

The cause of the true proposition that the stock market is declining is the true proposition that the Republicans cut taxes.

This view sounds very strange. *Propositions* are normally thought of as entities located outside of space and time, and it is hard to see how such entities could cause things to happen in the world. But perhaps the real claims being made are (i) the complete truth about causation can be expressed using a bunch of BECAUSE statements, and perhaps (ii) such statements express a certain relation (call it the 'is true because of the truth of' relation if you like) between propositions.