

Presentism and the Growing Block

PHIL 1480 Metaphysics

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1. The question: are past and future objects real?

Eternalism: past, present and future objects all exist. There are things that used to exist but no longer exist, and things that will exist but do not yet exist.

Presentism: only presently existing objects exist. 'Whatever is, is now.'

The growing block view: past and present objects exist, but future ones don't.

[*A nameless view which no-one holds*: present and future objects exist, but past ones don't.]

2. Restricted and unrestricted quantification

In ordinary life, when we use quantifiers (expressions like 'everyone', 'something', 'few philosophers'), we usually use them *restrictedly*, to talk about some contextually salient subclass of the universe: 'Everyone's here'; 'There's no beer.'

But we seem to be able to understand the question 'are there any Fs' in an *unrestricted* sense: 'are there any Fs, ignoring absolutely nothing whatsoever?'

3. Are there any baby dinosaurs?

Everyone will agree that there is a sense of this question on which the answer is *no*. But some will think that when we hear the question in this way, we are taking the quantifiers as restricted: *unrestrictedly speaking*, according to them, there *are* baby dinosaurs.

Objection: obviously nothing at all is a baby dinosaur *at the present time*. So if 'something is a baby dinosaur' is true, it must be true in some *timeless* sense of the predicate 'is a baby dinosaur'. But what could that timeless sense of 'is a baby dinosaur' be? Is being a baby dinosaur at *some* time enough for being a baby dinosaur, *timelessly speaking*? But then being an adult dinosaur at some time should be enough for being an adult dinosaur, *timelessly speaking*; in which case we will have to say that some things are (timelessly speaking) both baby dinosaurs and adult dinosaurs—which sounds contradictory!

- The corresponding objection to the claim that there are *dinosaurs*, *unrestrictedly speaking*, is not so obviously good.

So let's instead ask: is there anything that is a baby dinosaur *at some time or other*? That is: is there something such that it *was*, or *is*, or *will be* a baby dinosaur?

Answer (i): yes. Some of the things that there are, *unrestrictedly speaking*, are things which were baby dinosaurs in 100,000,000 BC.

Answer (ii): no. Even speaking unrestrictedly, there are no such things. It's true that 100,000,000 years ago something was a baby dinosaur. But absolutely nothing is such that 100,000,000 years ago *it* was a baby dinosaur.

- Compare: it could have been that something was a brother of mine. But absolutely nothing is such that *it* could have been a brother of mine.

B-theorists must give answer (i). If reality privileges no time over any other, then surely the objects of 100,000,000 BC are as real as you and I.

A-theorists, on the other hand, are free to give either answer (i) or answer (ii).

4. Presentism and "serious presentism"

You might think that *presentism* would entail answer (ii). But actually that's not so clear. Someone who holds that things do not cease to exist when they die could hold, not only that *there are* baby dinosaurs, but that there are *now* ex-baby-dinosaurs.

- This doesn't have to involve belief in an *afterlife* or anything like that. A possible view: after death, nothing could think or act or be located anywhere in space or be a dinosaur or be a person. The only properties things can have after death are things like: being self-identical; having in the past been a dinosaur; having in the past thought and acted; etc.
- People sometimes use 'serious presentism' as a label for the combination of the following views: (i) presentism is true; (ii) it is possible that there were once things which no longer exist; (iii) it is possible that there will in the future be things which do not yet exist.
- A "non-serious" presentist could be a "quasi-eternalist", holding that nothing could ever start to exist or cease to exist; or a "quasi-growing-block theorist", holding that it is possible for things to come into existence but not possible for anything to cease to exist. [Q: is Broad a growing block theorist, or only a quasi-growing block theorist?]

An argument from presentism to serious presentism: (P1) A concrete object cannot exist without being located somewhere in space. (P2) In the past, there were concrete objects that are not now located anywhere in space, and in the future, there will be concrete objects that are not now located anywhere in space. Therefore (C) in the past, there were concrete objects that do not now exist, and in the future, there will be concrete objects that do not now exist.

- Non-serious presentists will almost certainly deny P1.

5. An argument for presentism

'Now' seems in general to be *redundant*, in the sense that 'P' and 'It is now the case that P' are trivially equivalent to each other.

- (i) 'Joe is a baby dinosaur' — 'Joe is now a baby dinosaur'.

- (ii) 'The second world war lasted 5 years' — 'It is now the case that the second world war lasted 5 years'.

If so, 'there are Fs' and 'there are now Fs' are also equivalent. For example, 'there are things which were once baby dinosaurs' and 'there are now things which were once baby dinosaurs' are equivalent.

- Many *B-theorists* have wanted to resist the claim that 'now' is redundant in this way. Perhaps there is even an argument from the B-theory to the claim that 'now' does not work like this.
- McTaggart's argument against the reality of the A-series seems to depend on the assumption that there are two senses of 'is', one expressing the present tense and one expressing 'pure predication'. Arguably, the moral of that argument is that the A-theorist should not accept any such distinction. But if the 'is' in 'there are Fs' is present-tensed, it should be possible to add 'now' without changing truth-value.

6. Times

Are there any *times* other than the present moment?

Some presentists—even some serious presentists—say *yes*. The time *4pm on 30 August 30th 1972*, for example, exists, and exists *now*, even though it is not *present*.

- Compare this with the view that *other possible worlds* exist, and *actually* exist, even though they are not *actual*.

Other presentists say no. Likewise, some growing block theorists say that there are past times but no future times.

An argument for the existence of past times:

- P1. It was raining exactly two days ago.
P2. If it was raining exactly two days ago, then there is a time *t* that is exactly two days before the present, such that it is raining at *t*.
P3. Therefore, there is a time that is exactly two days before the present.

An argument for the existence of future times:

- P1. The earth will still be approximately spherical exactly two days hence.
P2. If the earth will still be approximately spherical exactly two days hence, then there is a time *t* that is exactly two days after the present, such that the earth is approximately spherical at *t*.
P3. Therefore, there is a time that is exactly two days after the present.

Broad seems to want resist this argument by denying P1! In general, according to Broad, judgments about the future are *neither true nor false* at the time they are made.

- Q: how can this not be totally insane?