The Philosophy of Time
Lecture Six

Speaking of other Times

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Speaking of other Times

Last Week

- Last week we introduced **presentism**:
  - Presentism = Only the present exists

- Presentism stands in opposition to **eternalism**:
  - Eternalism = The past, present and future all exist

- We should understand the presentists and eternalists as arguing about **things** and **events**
  - The presentist says that only present things and events exist, the eternalist says that past, present and future things and events exist

An Obvious Problem

- This week we are going to focus on one of the obvious objections to presentism

- We talk about the past and the future all the time, and much of what we say is surely **true**

  (M) The Moon Landing happened in the past

- But it is hard to see how a **presentist** could agree that (M) is true

- If presentism is correct, (M) is about an event which does not exist anymore!

An Extreme Response

- How should a presentist respond to this objection?
- One extreme response would be to deny that any sentence about the past or the future is true
- That response is so radical that we will not look at it today
- Instead, we will take it for granted that presentists must find some way to account for our true talk about the past and the future
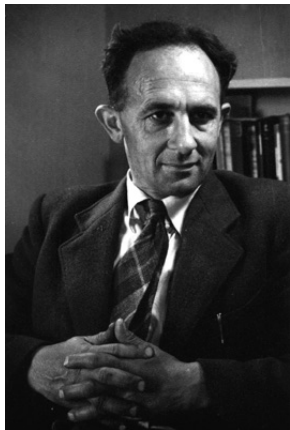
Speaking of other Times

A.N. Prior

- Prior was a prominent presentist in the 20th Century
- Although he didn't think that the past and the future exist, he did think that we could talk truthfully "about" the past and the present
- His guiding idea was that when we use words like 'in the past', we create a non-committal context, a bit like when we say 'in *The Lord of the Rings*'

A.N. Prior

A Preliminary: Eliminating Reference to Events

- We often appear to refer to events with singular terms as in this sentence:

  (M) The Moon Landing happened in the past

- On the face of it, we are referring to an event — the Moon Landing — and attributing a property to it — pastness

- But according to Prior, appearances are deceiving

- Really, we should understand (M) like this:

  (M′) It was the case that: men are on the Moon

Temporal Operators, Not Predicates

> (M) The Moon Landing happened in the past
>
> (M′) It was the case that: men are on the Moon

- The important difference between (M) and (M′) is that (M) appears to refer to an **event**, and (M′) doesn't

- In (M′), we just refer to ordinary things, like men and the Moon

- Instead of using a predicate, 'is past', we use a **sentential operator**, 'It was the case that...'

  - A more familiar example of a sentential operator: It is not the case that...

Temporal Operators, Not Predicates

The Moon Landing happened in the past
⇓
It was the case that: men are on the Moon

The Moon Landing is happening in the present
⇓
It is now the case that: men are on the Moon

The Moon Landing will happen in the future
⇓
It will be the case that: men are on the Moon

Temporal Operators, Not Tensed Verbs

Men were on the Moon
⇓
It was the case that: men are on the Moon

Men are now on the Moon
⇓
It is now the case that: men are on the Moon

Men will be on the Moon
⇓
It will be the case that: men are on the Moon

The Presentist Application of these Operators

- According to Prior, these temporal operators are the key to understanding how a presentist can talk truthfully about the past and the future

- He thinks that operators like these create contexts which are not ontological committing

- The best way to explain this is by looking at some analogous examples

In the Fiction...

(B) Bilbo Baggins is a hobbit

- Philosophers usually say that (B) is **not** true
    - Bilbo Baggins does not exist, and so is not a hobbit!

- But of course, we can all agree that this is true:

    (B′) In *The Lord of the Rings*: Bilbo Baggins is a hobbit

- All that is required for (B′) to be true is that it be part of Tolkein's story that Bilbo is a hobbit (and it is)

Possibly...

- Very sadly, the following sentence is not true:

    (J) I have a private jet

- But of course, that doesn't stop this from being true:

    (J′) It is possible that: I have a private jet

- All that is required for (J′) to be true is that there be a possible world in which I have a private jet, and there presumably is

Defusing Ontological Commitment

- One of the things that operators like 'In *The Lord of the Rings*...' and 'It is possible that...' do is defuse the ontological commitments that sentences ordinarily have

  - Bilbo Baggins is a hobbit ⊢ Bilbo Baggins exists

  - I have a private jet ⊢ there exists a private jet which I own

  - In *The Lord of the Rings*: Bilbo Baggins is a hobbit ⊬ Bilbo Baggins exists

  - It is possible that: I have a private jet ⊬ there exists a private jet which I own

- Prior thinks that temporal operators have a similar effect

Past and Future

- The following sentence is not true:

  – There are men on the Moon

- But that does not stop either of these being true:

  – It was the case that: there are men on the Moon
  – It will be the case that: there are men on the Moon

- The reason is that 'It was the case that...' and 'It will be the case that...' defuse ontological commitments, just like 'In *The Lord of the Rings*...' and 'It is possible that...'

The Redundant Present Tense

- The exception to this rule is when we use 'It is now the case that...'

- According to Prior, the following two sentences are logically equivalent:

  - There are men on the Moon
  - It is now the case that: there are men on the Moon

- In this case, the operator 'It is now the case that...' is redundant

- The reason that Prior thinks this case is special is, of course, because he is a presentist

  - To say how the world is right now is to say how it is, full stop!

What do you think of Prior's solution so far?

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An Obvious Problem

- There is an obvious question to ask:

  - What makes the claim 'It was the case that: there are men on the Moon' true?

- An **eternalist** could answer this question easily:

  - 'It was the case that: there are men on the Moon' is true because at some date before the 22nd of February 2017, there are men on the Moon

- Eternalists can give this answer because they think that the past exists just as much as the present, and so there are (tenselessly) men on the Moon in the past

- Obviously, **presentists** cannot give this answer

- But what can they say!?

Not Like Fiction (Obviously)

- At this point the presentist will obviously want to distance temporal operators from fictional operators, like 'In *The Lord of the Rings*...'

- What makes 'In *The Lord of the Rings*: Bilbo is a hobbit' true is that Tolkein wrote the particular story that he did

- Clearly, the past and the future are not like that, they are not mere stories

What about Possiblity?

- It might be better to think about 'It was the case that...' on the model of 'It is possible that...'

- Nowadays, we say that 'It is possible that: p' is true iff 'p' is true at some possible world

- By analogy, we would say that 'It was the case that: p' is true iff 'p' is true at some earlier time

- That may not sound very presentist, but it is only a problem if we take the talk of "times" too seriously

- Maybe we could refuse to take it seriously, just like some people refuse to take talk of "possible worlds" seriously?

Ersatz Worlds & Ersatz Times

- According to some philosophers, "possible worlds" are just consistent sets of propositions

- To say that 'p' is true at world w is just to say that 'p' is entailed by the set of propositions w

- Likewise, we could say that "times" are just consistent sets of sentences

    (This is what Crisp says in Item 16 of the reading pack, section 3.4, which you should all read)

Against Ersatz Times

- There are *lots* of consistent sets of propositions; why is it that some consistent sets get to be "times", and others don't?
- There are plenty of consistent sets of propositions which include the following proposition:
    - Julius Caesar died in Gaul
- Why don't any of these sets get to count as "times"?

Against Ersatz Times

- It is no good to say: Because these ersatz times are meant to represent how things were, and Julius Caesar didn't die in Gaul!

- That presupposes that we already have a grasp on what it is to say that Julius Caesar **didn't** (past tense) die in Gaul (i.e. It was never the case that: Julius Caesar is dying in Gaul)

- But all this stuff about ersatz times was meant to explain what makes it true or false that Julius Caesar didn't die in Gaul!

Temporal Operators without Explanation

- There are some other explanations that presentists could try, but we will not look at them
- Let's imagine instead that presentists just say that there is no explaining why some sentences starting 'It was the case that...' are true and others aren't
- That doesn't definitively show that presentism is wrong

Temporal Operators without Explanation

- The presentists could dig in their heels and insist that tensed facts are just part of the world, and cannot be further explained

  - It is just a fundamental fact that Julius Caesar did not die in Gaul, and there's no more to it than that

- This may be very unsatisfying, but the presentist could fairly point out that we **all** have to accept some facts as fundamental and resistant to further explanation

What do you think of the prospects for presentism here?

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A Related Problem

- Let's just grant for now that we are happy with something like Prior's trick for dealing with sentences about the past and the future

- There is still a related problem which hasn't been dealt with

- This is the problem of **singular propositions** about past/future things

A Brief bit of History

- According to Bertrand Russell, (almost all) proper names are really **definite descriptions** in disguise

    - Aristotle $=_{df}$ the philosopher who was taught by Plato, and who taught Alexander the Great, and who...

- This view was popular for a long time, but then in the 1970s Saul Kripke raised some good objections to it

- We will not look at those objections!

- After Kripke, the consensus is that the job of a term like 'Aristotle' isn't to abbreviate a description, but to directly pick out Aristotle himself

What is a Singular Proposition?

- **Propositions** are what we express when we use (declarative) sentences

- **Singular propositions** are expressed by sentences which include expressions which work by directly picking an object out

  – Aristotle was Greek

- Clearly, there is an intimate relation between a singular proposition and the thing it is about

- **Existentialism:** The existence of a singular proposition depends on the existence of the object it is about

The Problem for Presentism

- According to presentism, Aristotle does not exist

- Thus according to Existentialism, [Aristotle was Greek] does not exist

    (I will use square brackets for propositions)

- But that is absurd!
    - We all believe [Aristotle was Greek]
    - If 'Aristotle was Greek' expresses any proposition at all — which it surely does — then it expresses [Aristotle was Greek]

The Russellian Way Out

- This problem **could** have been avoided with if we thought that 'Aristotle' was a disguised definite description

- Then [Aristotle was Greek] wouldn't be a singular proposition, and so Existentialism wouldn't kick in

- Instead, we would think of it as [The x such that Ax is Greek]
  (where Ax is an abbreviation for: x is a philosopher who was taught by Plato, and who taught Alexander the Great, and who...)

- Then, applying Russell's famous analysis of definite descriptions, this would be turned into a purely general proposition: $[\exists x(Ax \& \forall y(Ay \supset y = x) \& x \text{ is Greek})]$

- **But to repeat:** since Kripke, not many philosophers think of 'Aristotle' as a disguised description

Rejecting Existentialism?

- **Existentialism:** The existence of a singular proposition depends on the existence of the object it is about

- A presentist could try rejecting Existentialism, but that is not easy

- Existentialism doesn't come from nowhere: it seems to fall out of the natural way of trying to explain what 'Aristotle was Greek' means
  - 'Aristotle' refers to Aristotle
  - An object satisfies 'x was Greek' iff that object was Greek
  - 'Aristotle was Greek' is true iff the object referred to by 'Aristotle' satisfies 'x was Greek'

- The first step — 'Aristotle' refers to Aristotle — says that a term stands in a certain relation, *reference*, to Aristotle

- Surely that is only possible if Aristotle exists?

Rejecting Existentialism?

- Even if presentists find a way of rejecting Existentialism, the problems don't stop there
- A presentist would also need to find a way of accounting for the fact that these are two different propositions:
  - (1) [Socrates was Greek]
  - (2) [Julius Caesar was Greek]
- But what makes (1) and (2) different propositions?
- We want to say that it is because (1) is about Socrates, and (2) is about Julius Caesar
- But according to presentism, neither Socrates nor Caesar exist
- So (1) and (2) are different propositions because they are about different non-existent things?

What do you all think of the prospects for presentism here?

Reading for Next Week

- Next week we are going to look at a very different kind of
  problem for presentism: the fact that it doesn't fit very well
  with Special Relativity

- **DO NOT WORRY:** I will not be assuming *any* background
  knowledge of SR

- I will introduce you to what you **need** to know about SR, in
  the simplest terms possible, in order to understand this
  important problem for presentism

- Required Reading:
  - Crisp (2003), item 16 in the pack, section 3.3
  - Sider (2001), item 17 in the pack, section 4

- And if you fancy something a bit whackier:
  - Prior (1970), item 15 in the pack