

The Philosophy of Time

Lecture Eight

The Triviality Objection

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The Triviality Objection

Introducing the Triviality Objection

Tenseless Existence

Truth-Makers

A Quick Recap

- In the last two lectures, we looked at some very serious objections to presentism
 - In Lecture 6 we asked whether presentists can account for the fact that there are lots of truths which seem to be about the past/future
 - In Lecture 7 we asked whether presentism can be made consistent with the Special Theory of Relativity
- Let's imagine that the presentist somehow found a way of dealing with these objections
- This week we are going to look at the **Triviality Objection**
- Unlike the objections we have already looked at, the target of this objection is not just presentism: it is the whole debate between presentists and eternalists

Presentism and Eternalism

- **Presentism** = Only the present exists
- **Eternalism** = The past, present and future all exist
- On the face of it, it seems clear that the presentists and eternalists are involved in a substantial, metaphysical dispute
- They bring to mind completely different pictures of how reality is
 - Eternalism brings to mind the image of a huge static, four-dimensional block, which contains every thing that has ever or will ever exist
 - Presentism brings to mind the image of a world made up of a single snapshot, things as they are at a single moment, and nothing more

Presentism and Eternalism: Just Two Pictures?

- But we should always be careful when dealing with philosophical pictures
- Sometimes, we can be misled into thinking that two people are having a deep philosophical debate, when really they are just using two different pictures to describe exactly the same reality
- We shouldn't take sides in debates like these; we should just point out that really, both sides are saying the same thing
- The Triviality Objection is designed to show that the debate between presentists and eternalists is this kind of debate

Two Versions of Presentism

- Presentism = Only the present exists
- How should we understand 'exists' here?
- Two suggestions:
 - (1) 'exists' is in the present tense: 'exists now'
 - (2) 'exists' is short for the disjunction: 'has existed, exists now, or will exist'
- **Presentism₁** = Only the present exists now
- **Presentism₂** = Only the present has existed, exists now or will exist

Presentism as Trivially True

- Presentism₁ = Only the present exists now
- Presentism₁ is trivially true: of course only the present exists **now!**
- This applies to things and events
 - We all agree that the Moon Landing does not **exist now**; it happened 48 years ago!
 - We all agree that Socrates does not **exist now**; he died thousands of years ago!

Presentism as Trivially False

- Presentism₂ = Only the present has existed, exists now or will exist
- Presentism₂ is obviously false
- We should all agree that past events **existed**, even though they do not **exist now**
 - As we saw in Lecture 6, even presentists want to agree that the Moon Landing **existed** 48 years ago
 - It was not clear exactly how the presentist could agree to this, but we are imagining that that problem has been dealt with
- We should also all agree that past things **existed**, even though they do not **exist now**
 - Even a presentist should agree that Socrates **existed** thousands of years ago

Presentism as Trivial, Either Way

- Presentism₁ = Only the present exists now
- Presentism₂ = Only the present has existed, exists now or will exist
- Whether we understand presentism as presentism₁ or presentism₂, it is trivial:
 - presentism₁ is trivially true
 - presentism₂ is trivially false
- So if these are the only ways of understanding presentism, then presentism is not a substantial metaphysical position
- This is not just a problem for presentism: the same thing happens to eternalism

Eternalism as Trivial, Either Way

- **Eternalism₁** = The past, present and future all exist now
- **Eternalism₂** = The past, present and future all existed, or exist now, or will exist
- Eternalism₁ is trivially false, and eternalism₂ is trivially true
- So if these are our only ways of understanding eternalism, then it also isn't a substantial metaphysical position
- In short, unless we find some different ways of understanding eternalism and presentism, then their whole debate falls apart
- We are **all** presentists₁, and we are **all** eternalists₂!

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A Way Out?

- Presentism₁ = Only the present exists now
- Presentism₂ = Only the present has existed, exists now or will exist
- The Triviality Objection only hits home if these are the **only** two ways of understanding presentism
- So anyone who thinks that there is an important debate here simply needs to find a new, substantial version of presentism

A Way Out?

- We will look at two attempts to do this, one in terms of tenseless existence, and one in terms of truth-making
- But there is another way of trying to do it that we won't discuss, due to Crisp
 - See Crisp (2003), item 16 of the reading pack, section 1
 - For criticism, see Ludlow (2004), item 24 in the reading pack

An Assumption of the Triviality Objection

- The Triviality Objection relied on a tacit assumption: There is no **tenseless** notion of existence
(More generally: every verb has to be tensed)
- But lots of philosophers think that we do have a tenseless notion of existence: **exists**
(I will write supposedly tenseless expressions in red)
- This notion of existence is not meant to be bound to any particular time
- To say that something **exists** is not to say that it exists at one time or another, or even that it always has existed and always will
- **Existence** is not relative to time at all

A Non-Trivial Debate

- **Presentism₃** = Only the present **exists**
- **Eternalism₃** = The past, present and future all **exist**
- We can all agree that if all this talk of tenseless **existence** makes sense, then there is a substantial debate between presentists₃ and eternalists₃
 - Is it only the things which **exist now** that **exist**, or do things which **existed** and **will exist** **exist** too?
- The question, then, is just whether we really can make sense of tenseless **existence**

The Case for: Obviously, Yes!

- Can we make any sense of tenseless **existence**?
- Some philosophers think the answer to this question is obviously, Yes!
 - Philosophers very quickly move into using tenseless language when discussing the philosophy of time
 - They all seem to understand each other, and to be able to carry out sensible debates (e.g. presentism versus eternalism)
 - Doesn't that show that they really understand each other?

The Case for: Obviously, No!

- Can we make any sense of tenseless **existence**?
- Some philosophers think the answer to this question is obviously, No!
 - Ordinary English doesn't seem to let us use tenseless verbs
 - This does not seem like a weird contingent feature of English; it seems to reflect the simple fact that humans live their lives in time, and so are always speaking from a temporal perspective
 - Humans cannot view the world from nowhen

Which way do you all lean?

Tenseless Existence in Mathematics

- The best strategy for the people who think that we can make sense of tenseless **existence** is to give uncontroversial examples of using it
- Perhaps the most obvious examples to try are mathematical truths:
 - There exists a prime number greater than 3
- It is tempting to insist that the word 'exists' is not here used in the present tense
 - There **now** exists a prime number greater than 3
- That sounds strange, but these sounds even stranger:
 - There **existed** a prime number greater than 3
 - There **will exist** a prime number greater than 3

Tenseless Existence in Mathematics

- Some philosophers take this as evidence that we do have a tenseless notion of **existence**
- However, it is not clear how far these examples really take us
- To begin with, although tensed claims in mathematics can sound strange in isolation, they can also sound fine in certain contexts
 - Johnny's trying to prove that there's no prime number greater than 3, but he's wasting his time: there will **always** be a prime number greater than 3!
- Moreover, even if we are convinced that there is a tenseless notion of **existence** that applies to mathematics, it seems a big leap to think that we can make sense of it applied to ordinary physical things!

Tenseless Existence in Everyday Life

- Sometimes philosophers claim that we need a notion of tenseless **existence** in everyday life
- Suppose you know that the Moon Landing happens on the 20th of July 1969, but you do not know what date it is today
- You do not know that the Moon Landing **is now happening** on the 20th of July 1969, or that it **happened** on that date, or that it **will happen** on that date
- You do not know which way to tense 'exists', because you do not know when the Moon Landing happened in relation to the present moment
- But you do know something: you know that the Moon Landing **happens** (**exists**) on the 20th of July 1969

Tenseless Existence in Everyday Life

- But this is actually a very bad example, because you can use tensed existence to express what you know
- You know that **either** the Moon Landing is now happening on the 20th of July 1969, **or** it happened on that date, **or** it will happen on that date

Tenseless Existence in Logic

- In formal logic, we express existence with the existential quantifier:
 - There exists an $F \Rightarrow \exists xFx$
- On the face of it, this is a totally tenseless kind of **existence**

Tenseless Existence in Logic

- When giving a semantics for (predicate) logic, we supply a domain for the quantifier
 - Roughly: ' $\exists xFx$ ' is true iff ' Fx ' is true of one of the objects in the domain
- How are we to specify which things are in this domain?
- In simple cases, we just list the things in the domain, but in the more complex cases we specify some property which all the objects have
 - The domain is the set of things which are dogs
 - The domain is the set of things which were born in 1987
 - The domain is the set of things which will die after 2000
- All of these ways of specifying the domain are clearly tensed, and this tense would presumably infect the meaning of the quantifier

Tenseless Existence in Logic

- The question of whether the quantifier expresses tenseless **existence** has now been pushed back to the question of whether we can specify the domain in an untensed way
- But this is just as difficult as the original question, and as before some people will say that we obviously can, and others will say that we obviously can't

Where Are We?

- If we can grasp a tenseless concept of **existence**, then there is a substantial debate for presentists and eternalists to have
- But it isn't clear whether we can grasp tenseless **existence**
- We haven't seen any absolutely clear examples of it, but maybe there are some out there
- It seems we've reached a bit of a stalemate here!

What do you all think now?

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Truth-Making, Not Existence

- According to Tom Stoneham, if we think of the presentist/eternalist debate as a debate about existence, then the Triviality Objection is unavoidable
 - See his ‘Time and Truth’, item 25 in the reading pack
- But Stoneham thinks that there is an important debate for presentists and eternalists to have about **truth-making**

The Truth-Making Intuition

- Truth is not an intrinsic property of a proposition
- It is not just that some propositions are true and others are false, say no more about it
- True propositions are true **because** the world is a certain way
- The world **makes** the true propositions be true
 - [Grass is green] is true because grass is green
 - The fact that grass is green makes [Grass is green] true

What is a Truth-Maker?

- A **truth-maker** for a proposition is something which makes the proposition be true
 - Formally: x is a truth-maker for $[P]$ $=_{df}$ Necessarily, if x exists then $[P]$ is true
- So the fact that grass is green makes [Grass is green] true because the proposition is true in every world the fact exists in
- The idea of a truth-maker is very general, and you could fill it out in all sorts of different ways, but fortunately the details won't matter for us

Warning! Warning! Warning!

Lots of philosophers are very sceptical of the whole idea of truth-makers!

Warning! Warning! Warning!

Truth-Making for Presentists

- Presentists (we are assuming) are happy to agree that some propositions “about” the past/future are true
- A presentist will obviously have to find truth-makers for these propositions in the present
 - If [This lecture will end at 11am] is true, then that is because something in the present is making it true
- Different presentists will make different suggestions about what present things make this proposition true
 - Is it something to do with my present intentions?
 - Is it something to do with the laws of nature (determinism)?
 - Is it just because it is a fact in the present that this lecture will end at 11am?

Presentism as a Thesis about Truth-Making

- Whatever exactly the presentist says, Stoneham takes it that this is the core of presentism
- **Presentism₄** = If $[P]$ is true then there now exists a truth-maker for $[P]$
- **Eternalism₄** = There is some proposition $[P]$ which is made true by something which once existed, but not by anything which exists now; there is another proposition $[Q]$ which is made true by something which will exist, but not by anything which exists now
- Stoneham argues that there is a substantive debate between presentists₄ and eternalists₄

Is this the Eternalist/Presentist Debate?

- If we are happy with the notion of truth-makers, then we should agree that there is a substantial debate between presentism₄ and eternalism₄
- But I do not think that it is really the debate that presentists and eternalists were meant to be having
- Let's all agree that if you are a presentist, you **have to** accept presentism₄
- The trouble is that an eternalist surely **can** accept presentism₄ too!

Is this the Eternalist/Presentist Debate?

- Imagine you were an eternalist, and you were also a determinist
- According to determinism, when we put together the laws of nature with a complete description of how the world is right now, we can predict everything about the future
- Surely, then, the laws of nature along with the facts about how the world is right now **are truth-makers** for every proposition “about” the future
- And if a “reverse” determinism is true, then the laws of nature along with the facts about how the world is right now will also be truth-makers for every proposition about the past

Is this the Eternalist/Presentist Debate?

- This kind of determinist eternalist would accept presentism₄
 - Presentism₄ = If $[P]$ is true then there now exists a truth-maker for $[P]$
- But in that case, the eternalist/presentist debate could not really be about whether presentism₄ is true!

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