

# The Philosophy of Time

## Lecture Five

# Two Arguments for Presentism

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# Two Arguments for Presentism

## Introduction: Presentism versus Eternalism

Presentism and Existence

The Problem of Temporary Intrinsic

Thank Goodness That's Over!

It's Not Quite Over Yet!

## Presentism versus Eternalism

- **Presentism**  $\approx$  only the present is real
  - The future has yet to happen
  - The past has been and gone
  - All that there is is this present moment
- **Eternalism**  $\approx$  the past, present and future are all equally real
  - Different moments in time are a lot like different positions in space
  - Things in London aren't less real than things in York just because they are far away from us
  - Things in the past aren't less real than things today just because they are long before us

## Presentism and the A-Series

- The presentist clearly takes the A-Series of time very seriously
- **The A-Series**
  - Past — Present — Future
  - The Moon Landing is in the past, this lecture is in the present, and the Mars Landing is in the future
- For the presentist, when an event moves from the future into the present, it **becomes real**, it **comes into existence**
- Then, when the event moves from the present into the past, it **slips out of existence**

## Eternalism and the A-Series

- It might also seem clear that the eternalist **doesn't** take the A-Series very seriously, but some eternalists have claimed otherwise
- **The Moving Spotlight**  $\approx$  the past, present and future are all equally real, but the present is still *special* in some important way
- We will set this Moving Spotlight option to one side, and assume that our version of eternalism assigns no special privilege to the present moment

## Against the Moving Spotlight

- The Moving Spotlight tries to combine eternalism with a real, objective A-Series
- As we saw last week, the Dummett-McTaggart argument seems to show that eternalism **cannot** be combined with a real A-Series
- Only presentism is consistent with the reality of the A-Series

## The Growing Block

- Presentism and eternalism are extremes, and there is a more moderate view in between the two
- **The Growing Block**  $\approx$  the past and present are equally real, but the future is not
  - The past and the present are real because they are **fixed**
  - But the future is open; it has not been fixed yet; it is not real
- We are going to set The Growing Block option to one side, for exactly the same reason that we set aside the Moving Spotlight
  - The Growing Block is committed to the reality of the A-Series, but the Dummett-McTaggart argument seems to show that only presentism is consistent with the reality of the A-Series

## Presentism or Eternalism?

- If the Dummett-McTaggart argument is right, then we have to choose between presentism and eternalism; but which should we choose?
- Our intuitions can be made to point in either direction
  - Only the present moment is real: the future is not yet real, and the past has been and gone!
  - No one thinks that far away locations in space are unreal just because they are far away; so why would anyone think that moments long passed are unreal just because they are long passed?
- We need more than intuitions: we need arguments!
- This week we will look at two arguments for presentism



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## Presentism as an Existential Claim

- What does it mean to say that only the present moment is “real”?
- **Presentism** = only the present *exists*
  - Only present **events** exist
    - This lecture exists, because it is happening right now
    - The Moon Landing no longer exists, because it happened in the past
    - The Mars Landing does not yet exist, because it will happen in the future
  - Only present **things** exist
    - You exist, because you exist right now
    - Socrates no longer exists, because he only existed in the past
    - Your grandchildren do not yet exist, because they exist in the future

## Eternalism as an Existential Claim

- When we understand presentism in this way, eternalism becomes:
- **Eternalism** = the past, present and future all exist
  - Past, present and future **events** all exist
    - This lecture exists
    - The Moon Landing exists
    - The Mars Landing exists
  - Past, present and future **things** all exist
    - You exist
    - Socrates exists
    - Your grandchildren exist

## Presentism and Other Times

- If presentists do not think that past events **exist**, what do they think about sentences like the following?
  - The Moon Landing was viewed by millions of people
- We might think that presentists would have to say that this sentence is **not true**
- It mentions a past event, the Moon Landing, and the presentist says that past events do not exist
- Most of the time, we seem to take it for granted that sentences mentioning things that do not exist are not true
  - Vulcan orbits the Sun

## Presentism and Other Times

- Importantly, very few presentists want to say that every sentence about the past, or about the future, is untrue
- As a result, presentists have to come up with some explanation about how such sentences can be true, even though they seem to be about events which do not exist
- **This is not an easy thing to do!!!**
- We will look at what the presentists have to say about this in Lectures 6 and 7
- Until then, I will grant for the sake of argument that the presentist has some story to tell about how sentences about the past and the future can be true

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## The Problem of Temporary Intrinsic

- The **Problem of Temporary Intrinsic** was introduced by Lewis
  - See Item 5 of the Reading Pack
- It is a problem about how objects can **change** their intrinsic properties
- As we go through it, you will probably get a strong sense of déjà vu, bringing you right back to Lecture 2, when we were talking about McTaggart's view of change

## Intrinsic versus Relational

- **Relational property:** the property of standing in a given relation to something
  - being the son of Queen Elizabeth II
  - being the husband of Queen Elizabeth II
  - being five feet away from Queen Elizabeth II
- **Intrinsic property:** a property which an object has “in and of itself”
  - being six feet tall (?)
  - weighing 70kg (?)
  - being conscious (?)



## A Silly Argument

- Things seem to change their intrinsic properties as time goes on



My banana is green at 9am on the 15th of February 2017



My banana is not green at 9am on the 16th of February 2017

- So my banana is both green and not green!

## Why is that Argument Silly?

- We all know that that argument is silly, but **why** is it silly?
- Lewis suggests three different responses we could have:
  - (1) We could analyse intrinsic properties as relations to times
  - (2) We could think of an object as being made up of temporal parts
  - (3) We could be presentists

## Option 1: A Relational Analysis of Intrinsic Properties

- *Being green* is not really a **property** of an object
- *Being green* is a **relation** between an object and a time
  - My banana bears the *being green* relation to 9am on the 15th of February 2017
  - My banana does not bear the *being green* relation to 9am on the 16th of February 2017
- Lewis rejects this option because he thinks it is tantamount to admitting that *being green* is not really an intrinsic property
- *Being green* is not a property which my banana has “in and of itself”: it is a **relation** between my banana and a time
- So if we generally took this option, we would end up denying that objects ever change their intrinsic properties

## Option 2: Temporal Parts

- Lewis himself plumps for Option 2: think of objects as being made up of temporal parts
  - My banana has a green temporal part at 9am on the 15th of February 2017
  - My banana does not have a green temporal part at 9am on the 16th of February 2017
- This does solve the problem, but it commits us to the idea that ordinary things have temporal parts
- Not everyone likes that idea: remember Mellor from Lecture 2!
  - See Item 12 in the Reading Pack to remind yourself

## Option 3: Presentism

- The final option is presentism
  - If we do not think that 16th of February 2017 exists, then it seems that the problem disappears
  - My banana is just green, because it's green **right now**, and that's that!
- Some presentists (e.g. Crisp, item 10 in the pack) think that presentism is the best option here
- They think it is a virtue of presentism that it allows us to acknowledge that objects really do change their **intrinsic** properties, without having to say that ordinary objects have temporal parts
- What do you think? Is this a good reason to accept presentism?

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## Thank Goodness That's Over!

- Imagine that you have a headache for an hour; then it finally lets up, and you say: thank goodness that's over!
- What exactly are you thanking goodness for?
- The answer is **easy** for presentism:
  - After the hour is up, the headache is in the **past**, and so it **no longer exists!**
- But what should an eternalist say?

## Eternalist Accounts of A-Terminology

- At the beginning of this lecture, we dismissed the Moving Spotlight view
  - Our eternalist does not believe that the A-Series is a **real**, objective feature of the world!
- So how should our eternalist understand A-Terminology, like 'in the past' or 'in the future'?
- They treat these expressions as **indexicals** (or "token reflexive"):
  - An utterance,  $u$ , of 'e is in the past' is true iff  $e$  occurs before  $u$
  - An utterance,  $u$ , of 'e is in the future' is true iff  $e$  occurs after  $u$



## The Eternalist Account of 'That's Over'

- If we apply this general approach to 'That's over!', we get:
  - An utterance,  $u$ , of 'That's over' is true iff  $u$  is after the thing referred to by 'that'
- But now it seems that on the eternalist's account, when you say 'Thank goodness that's over!', you are thanking goodness that your utterance occurs after your headache
- That's absurd: you are thanking goodness that your headache is in the **past**, not that your utterance came after the headache

## The Eternalist Account of 'That's Over'

- To make this clear, imagine that you had planned to say 'Thank goodness that's over!' the moment your headache cleared
- In that case, you knew that your utterance of that sentence would come after your headache while you were having your headache
- But you wouldn't have wanted to thank goodness for that then!

## An Argument for Presentism?

- Prior tries to turn this into an argument for presentism
  - See his 1959 article, 'Thank Goodness That's Over', in *Philosophy*. This one isn't in the reading pack, but it's on JSTOR
- We can put the argument like this:
  - Presentism has no difficulty understanding what you are thankful for
  - Eternalism does: eternalism doesn't take the A-Series seriously, but without the A-Series you're just thanking goodness that your utterance is after your headache
  - So we should accept presentism over eternalism
- What do you think of this argument?

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## Eternalism and the A-Series

- Eternalists do not think that the A-Series is a **real** feature of the world
- But that does not mean that it's not an important part of the way **we think** about the world
- Earlier we gave the eternalist's truth-conditions for an utterance of 'That's over':
  - An utterance,  $u$ , of 'That's over' is true iff  $u$  is after the thing referred to by 'that'
- But the mere fact that they give  $u$  this truth-condition **does not** automatically mean that they think  $u$  **means the same thing** as ' $u$  is after my headache'

## The Supermarket Example

- We can help make this clearer by looking at an analogous case, from Perry's 1979 article, 'The Problem of the Essential Indexical'
- Imagine that you are walking around a supermarket, and you notice a path of sugar trailing around the supermarket
- You realise that someone must be carrying a sugar bag with a hole in it, and you decide to try to catch up to them to let them know
- You follow the sugar around and around the supermarket, but you just cannot catch up to the person with the broken bag
- After a good long while of this, you finally realise that **you** are the one carrying a sugar bag with a hole in it
- You slap your head and announce: 'I am the one making the mess!'

## The Standard Truth-Conditions

- Pretty much everyone agrees that an utterance of 'I am  $F$ ' has the following truth-conditions:
  - An utterance,  $u$ , of 'I am  $F$ ' is true iff the speaker of  $u$  is  $F$
- Applied to 'I am the one making the mess':
  - An utterance,  $u$ , of 'I am the one making the mess' is true iff the speaker of  $u$  is the one making the mess

## Different Meaning

- But despite the fact that  $u$  has these truth-conditions, no one should suggest that  $u$  just **means the same thing** as 'The speaker of  $u$  is the one making the mess'
- You might have known all along that the person making the mess would utter this sentence when you eventually caught up with them
- What you eventually realised wasn't that the speaker of  $u$  was making the mess, but that **you** were making the mess!



## What does this Show?

- Indexical words like 'I' play a special role in our thinking
- When you slap your head and say, 'I am making the mess', you are expressing a different thought than the one expressed by 'The speaker of this utterance is making the mess'
- But this does not mean that 'I am making the mess' and 'The speaker of this utterance is making the mess' say different things about **the world**
- They say the same thing **about the world**, but they say it in **importantly different ways**

## Back to Eternalism

- The eternalist can say pretty much exactly the same thing about the utterance of 'Thank goodness that's over'
- An utterance,  $u$ , of 'That's over' is true iff  $u$  is after the thing referred to by 'that', but it does not **mean the same thing** as 'This utterance is after that'
- These two utterances express very different thoughts: the first is a cause of great relief, the second is not
- Nonetheless, the eternalist can insist that they say the same thing about **the world**
- They just say that thing in **importantly different ways**

## Further Reading

- If you are interested in this argument, there is a section of readings on it in the pack
- You should also look at Item 17, 'Against Presentism' by Sider, pp.18–21
- But for the next lecture, you should read the following:
  - Item 14, 'The Notion of the Present' by Prior
  - Item 18, 'A Defense of Presentism' by Markosian