

Presentism and the Sceptical Challenge

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Article info

CDD: 149.73

Received: 13.11.2016; Accepted: 17.11.2016

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1590/0100-6045.2016.V39N4.GT>

Keywords:

Ontology of Time

Eternalism

Presentism

ABSTRACT

Even hard-core metaphysicians should admit that certain disputes may indeed turn out not to be substantive. The debate between presentism and eternalism has recently come under sceptical attack. The aim of the paper is to argue that a certain approach to presentism is indeed in danger of succumbing to the sceptic, and thus a no-go for the presentist.

I. Introduction

Metaphysical disputes on whether certain entities exist or which alleged features of reality are more fundamental often come under attack from the sceptic, who thinks that the differences between the two views are not substantive. Although I do not think we should readily relinquish the right to do metaphysics, methodological prudence suggests that even hard-core metaphysicians (viz., metaphysicians who are not keen to allow for non-substantive disputes, such as Sider 2011) should admit that certain disputes may indeed turn out to be shallow. The debate between presentism and

eternalism has recently come under sceptical attack.¹ The aim of the paper is to argue that a certain approach to presentism is indeed in danger of succumbing to the sceptic, and thus a no-go for the presentist.

II. How to formulate the distinction

Certain sceptics argue against the possibility of formulating the ontological distinction between presentism and eternalism in a way that is either non-trivially false or non-trivially true.² Anti-sceptics counter-argue that the distinction can be formulated by appealing to some notion of existence that allows for claims on whose truth-value there is genuine disagreement between presentists and eternalists. I will not engage in this “triviality” debate, and I will assume that the distinction at stake can be formulated along the following lines: the presentist thinks that what exists *simpliciter* is what is confined to the present moment, since the present is an ontologically privileged temporal position; the eternalist maintains that what exists *simpliciter* also comprises things that are in the past or in the future, since the temporal position of an entity does not make any difference for ontology³. Thus, disagreement between the two positions is ontological: namely it concerns what exists *simpliciter* and need not concern other temporal features of reality. In particular, although eternalism is often associated with tense anti-realism, presentists and eternalists may agree on the issue of the reality of tenses.⁴ Let us focus then on versions of presentism and eternalism that are formulated

¹ See Savitt 2006, Dorato 2006, Callender 2011. Lowe 2005 and Miller 2005 defend a similar form of scepticism with respect to the endurance vs. perdurance debate. For scepticism about ontological distinctions see Dorr 2005, and Chalmers et al. 2009.

² See Meyer 2005 and the debate between Crisp (2004a and 2004b) and Ludlow (2004). See also Stoneham 2009 and Lombard 2010.

³ See Oaklander 2002, Sider 2006, and Zimmerman 1998.

⁴ Most philosophers agree that there are tense realist versions of eternalism, for instance the “spotlight view”. see Cameron 2015, Deasy 2015, Skow 2011 and 2015.

in terms of what they respectively accept as existing *simpliciter*, and bracket any possible further divergence between the two overall pictures.⁵

III. The Sceptical Challenge. Part I

Stubborn anti-sceptics may insist that once the distinction is intelligibly formulated, their job against the sceptic is done. However, the fact that it is possible to formulate the distinction in an intelligible way may not be sufficient for claiming that the distinction is substantial. What it takes for a dispute to be substantial is a delicate and intricate question that depends heavily on the general methodological setting we are in. Here I will not engage in a defense of an overall methodology for metaphysics, but restrict my observations to methodological contexts that are broadly speaking Quinean: we have to evaluate globally the theoretical virtues of our positions in order to justify the entities and basic ideology that we accept. It is broadly speaking Quinean precisely because endorsement of fundamental ideology also makes for substantive metaphysical distinctions.⁶

Within such a framework, what are the plausible minimal conditions that a position in a debate has to meet in order to withstand scepticism? Like other distinctions that are relevant for evaluating theoretical virtues, ontological

⁵ I am here limiting myself to what Tallant (2014) calls ‘Conventional Presentism’. I am aware that the view has been challenged (see references in note 2) and that there are alternative formulations, for instance in terms of a primitive tensed language and what is always the case (see Correia and Rosenkranz 2011), or in terms of Williamsonian ‘transientism’ (see Deasy 2016), or through an identification of *existing* with *being present* (Tallant 2014’s proposal). I think that my main argument holds also if the distinction is formulated in those alternative ways. See also Rasmussen 2012’s ‘tenseless presentism’. If a presentist can resist my conclusion by adopting an alternative formulation, then she can exploit it in favour of her position. I defended the view that the distinction between presentism and eternalism can be formulated in terms of existence *simpliciter* in Torrenco 2012.

⁶ See Sider 2011: Chap 9. I think, although I cannot argue for that here, that most of the methodological assumptions that I am making here are widely shared within the current debates in metaphysics.

distinctions are supposed to make a difference with respect to the *theoretical work* that the rival positions can do. *Explaining* is one of the most relevant “theoretical tasks” of metaphysical theories. An ontological distinction that does not make a difference in explanatory power should rightly come under suspicion. Thus, a necessary condition that presentism (as much as eternalism) has to meet in order to withstand scepticism is to be in a position to motivate a positive answer to the question below:

(SC) Do the distinguishing features of presentism (eternalism) have an explanatory role?

Here, two provisos are needed. First: “explanatory role” is a context-sensitive notion. Whether an entity (or a property, or a concept) has an explanatory role depends on what we aim at explaining. Given that presentism and eternalism are supposed to be overall rival views in the ontology of time, it may be a tricky and indeed impossible task to evaluate whether the challenge can be met. Again, I will concentrate on the explanatory role of the distinguishing features of presentism relative to a well-known problem: the *grounding problem* for true past-tensed existential claims (TptECs), namely, the problem of providing an explanation of why true sentences such as (1) are true. Thus, the sceptical challenge for the presentist is to provide an answer to (SC’).

(1) Dinosaurs existed

(SC’) Do the distinguishing features of presentism (eternalism) have an explanatory role in explaining why TptECs — such as (1) — are true (i.e., in solving the grounding problem)?

The limitation is somewhat arbitrary, but given the importance of the problem in the contemporary debate⁷, it is crucial for any form of presentism to have a way to answer the problem without thereby undermining the substantivity of the distinction between the presentist’s position and that of the eternalist. And the best way to secure this is to have a solution to the

⁷ See, for instance Mozerky (2011).

problem that hinges on some distinguishing feature of presentism. The same goes for eternalism, but I take for granted that anyone agrees that the eternalists have an easy way out to the challenge: the distinguishing feature of eternalism on which the solution to the grounding problem hinges is the existence of past entities.

Secondly, what exactly is a distinguishing feature? Although the distinction between presentism and eternalism is ontological and concerns the existence of non-present entities, different varieties of presentism may differ from eternalism also either with respect to their primitive ideology or with respect to some other aspect of their ontology (or both). For instance: the *Lucretian presentist* enlarges her usual ideology of present-tensed properties (that a A-theorist eternalist also accepts) with primitive past tensed properties — such as *being such that dinosaurs existed*⁸; the *Haecceitist presentist* accepts presently uninstantiated haecceities⁹; and the *Ersätzer presentist* accepts abstract “past” times in their ontology¹⁰. In line with the broadly Quinean methodology, I will regard these differences in ontology and in ideology as distinguishing features of each variant of presentism. Since each one has its own distinctive features, not all variants need to share the same fate with respect to their ability to meet the sceptical challenge.

IV. The Grounding Problem

In order to see which versions of presentism can and which cannot meet the sceptical challenge (SC), let us first flesh out the problem with respect to which the distinguishing feature of each version of presentism must have an explanatory role. To put it in a nutshell, the grounding problem for the presentist is to answer questions such as (Q) below.

(Q) Why is (1) true?

⁸ Bigelow (1996). Other versions that are problematic in this sense have dispositional (Parsons 2005) and distributional (Cameron 2010) properties as grounds.

⁹ Keller 2004, Ingram (2016) and (*forthcoming*). See also Adams (1986).

¹⁰ Bourne (2006), and Crisp (2007).

Roughly put, the eternalist appeals to past entities in providing an explanation, whereas the presentist does not. A first characterization of their answers is (E-A) and (P-A), respectively, below.

(E-A) Dinosaurs exist, and they are located in the past

(P-A) It was the case that dinosaurs exist

While (E-A) is incompatible with presentism, (P-A) is a claim that the presentist can accept in so far as the locution “it was the case that” works as a sentential operator that does *not* commit whoever accepts a sentence containing it to the existence of what is quantified over by the sentence within its scope. That is precisely how tense operators in the Priorian interpretation work, and how the presentist reads the expression. Now, while it is clear how the eternalist’s explanation (E-A) of the truth of (1) crucially appeals to past entities plus their location in time (the details, of course, may vary depending on the variety of eternalism), (P-A) leaves many options open. In particular, (P-A) — given the Priorian reading of tenses — allows the presentist to respect the negative constraint not to appeal to past entities in order to explain TptECs, but tells us little about her positive account. A positive account must come from an explicit construal of (P-A) in terms of the (present) entities and properties that the presentist appeals to in providing an answer to (Q).

Although a plethora of different options have been offered in the literature, for what follows only a major distinction between those options matters, namely whether the presentist takes (P-A) to be *grounded* or *ungrounded*¹¹. Following Tallant and Ingram (2015), I will call philosophers in the first group, at present the vast majority, *upstanding* presentists, and those in the second group *nefarious* presentists.¹² The *upstanding* presentist makes explicit the ground of (P-A) by accepting *sui generis* entities or *sui generis* properties, such as the ones that I have mentioned before introducing Lucretianism, Haecceitism and Ersatzism as varieties of presentism. For instance, the *Lucretian* construes (P-A) as expressing the present instantiation

¹¹ See my Torrenço (2013) and (2014).

¹² Examples of nefarious presentism are in Sanson *ms.*, Tallant (2009), Tallant (2010), Merricks (2007), Sanson and Caplan (2010), and Hinchliff (2010).

by a present entity (the whole world) of the relevant Lucretian property. Namely, she explicits it as (L-A) below.

(L-A) The world instantiates (now) *being such that dinosaurs existed*

The nefarious presentist takes (P-A) to be ungrounded in the strict sense that she refuses to provide any further specification of the entities and properties that grounds it. And not because it is undetermined what they are, but rather because there aren't any. It is quite clear where the charm of the nefarious position lies. By allowing ungrounded truths as explanatory tool, the nefarious presentist can avoid inflating her ideology or ontology, while retaining an explanatory power as adequate as that of the other varieties of presentism. Let us see now how the upstanding and the nefarious varieties cope with the sceptical challenge.

V. The Sceptical Challenge. Part II

If we ask how the eternalist would normally answer (SC), we quickly realize that there is one almost trivial answer. The eternalist maintains that it is in virtue of the simple existence of past objects and their temporal location that TptECs are true now¹³. Whoever does not accept such entities cannot ground TptECs in the same way, and whoever does accept them is thereby an eternalist. The answer that an upstanding presentist can provide is less immediate, because there are various options open. The upstanding presentist can maintain that it is in virtue of certain presently existing entities that TptECs are true — for instance, uninstantiated haecceities. She will then meet the challenge. Typically, the eternalist does not accept such entities, or at least she does not take them as relevant for explaining why TptECs are true (and

¹³ Again, details will differ depending on whether the eternalist is a standard B-theorist, a “traditional” moving spotlihter, a Williamsonian permanentist or some other position that accepts the ontological claim at issue here. Also, notice that if Tallant and Ingram 2014 are right and the upstanding presentists are compelled to endorse a nefarious attitude when providing an explanation of why their extra resources exist, the upstanding presentists may find themselves in a bind here.

in so far as the eternalist grounds past truths in such entities, she justifies the sceptical suspicion that *her* position is not substantially different from haecceitistic presentism). Alternatively, upstanding presentists can maintain that it is in virtue of certain presently instantiated properties that TptECs are true — for instance, the Lucretian properties. The relevant difference here between the Lucretian presentist and the eternalist lies in what they admit in their basic ideology. This difference is far from being non-substantial, precisely because the difference in ideology is manifest in how they both ground TptECs and truths about the past in general. But if the Lucretian meets the challenge, then any presentist who appeals to some feature of reality to explain the truth of TptECs, which the eternalist does not accept, or at least need not accept in order to solve the grounding problem, is likely to meet the challenge as well. As far as I am aware, any version of upstanding presentism on the market meets it. This is not surprising, given that the various versions have usually been devised at least in part as way to solve the grounding problem as an alternative to the eternalist solution¹⁴.

VI. And the nefarious? She should not go ostrich.

The nefarious' reading of the language of the explanation of the truth of TptECs seems to offer presentism a leaner ontology than that of the eternalist, with no price to be paid in terms of explanatory power or inflationary metaphysics. However, if the nefarious position fails to meet the sceptical challenge it runs a strong risk of qualifying as a sceptical position, rather than as a form of presentism. In what follows I argue that the nefarious may easily fail to provide an answer to (SC').

¹⁴ An alternative to the versions of upstanding presentism mentioned above, which I am not considering here, is minimalism. The minimalist appeals to the laws of nature in order to ground truths about the past on presently existing entities of an ordinary and unproblematic kind. See Ludlow (1999), Dainton (2001), and Markosian (2013). A minimalist presentist explains the present truth of TptECs by resorting to entities that the eternalist can also accept. However, they too meet the challenge because the eternalist typically does not endow such entities with the same explanatory role in explaining why TptECs are true (and in so far as she does it, the two positions come suspiciously close).

Roughly put, the reason why nefarious presentism may fail is very simple. Nefarious presentists allow themselves to resort to ungrounded claims about the past in providing an account of what makes TptECs true, in order to gain the explanatory power of the eternalist without paying any ontological or ideological price for it. Hence, the nefarious presentist's solution to the grounding problem holds *independently* of the specific ontology or ideology that she endorses. This means that they are in a difficult position to pin down the difference in their stances by resorting to the role that their respective metaphysics plays in resolving the grounding problem.

To make the point more vivid, consider — for a comparison — a version of presentism that is easily liable to sceptical criticism: the “un-collaborative” view¹⁵. The question on which presentists and eternalists take themselves to disagree is the following:

(Q₁) Do past entities exist?

One of the strategies of the sceptic is to provide evidence that the different responses the eternalist and the presentist give respectively to (Q₁) are indeed compatible with one another, since they are based on a difference in what they understand “exist” in (Q₁) as expressing. The sceptic denies that there is a notion of simple existence in whose terms both parties understand “exist” in (Q₁). According to the sceptic, the presentist answers “no” to (Q₁), because she understands “existence” as present tense existence, while the eternalist answers “yes” to (Q₁), because she understands “existence” as existence at any time, namely as a conjunction of past, present and future tense existence. Thus, they are not answering the *same* question, and their disagreement over ontology is only apparent, since their answers express compatible propositions¹⁶.

I think that the sceptic is wrong: both the presentist and the eternalist (for the most part) understand “exist” in (Q₁) as simple existence, thereby giving substantially different and incompatible answers to the same question.

¹⁵ Cf the “un-cooperative tensor” of Parson 2005.

¹⁶ Note that if the sceptic is right, then, given that the two parties to the debate maintain that what they claim about ontology is not reciprocally compatible, at least one of the two is misunderstanding some of the other's (and possibly her own) words.

However, suppose now that a presentist — the *un-collaborative presentist* — claims *both* that “exist” in (Q₁) is to be understood as present tense existence, *and* that she is in disagreement with the eternalist over ontology. The sceptic would have a point in claiming that it is difficult to understand where the disagreement between the eternalist and this un-collaborative version of presentism lies. It looks as if they merely disagree on how to construe the term “exist” in ordinary language: the presentist sticks to the present tense reading, while the eternalist gives it a reading in terms of simple existence. Note that I am not claiming that a disagreement between the eternalist and the presentist on this matter would be problematic. There is nothing wrong if the two positions come with different semantic views of ordinary language. However, if the disagreement between them is ontological and not *merely* semantic, they should at some point, that is, when they are engaged in serious metaphysical talk, *agree* on the fact that the term “exist” in (Q₁) implies simple existence, and *disagree* on the truth value of an affirmative (or negative) answer to (Q₁) when it is so construed¹⁷.

Now, my claim is that the nefarious may be easily tempted to behave analogously to the un-collaborative presentist with respect to question (Q). If so, she is liable to an analogous sceptical criticism.

(Q) Why is (1) true?

Consider again the upstanding presentist. Both the upstanding presentist and the eternalist understand “why” in (Q) as requiring an answer that essentially appeals to some distinctive feature of their position. Thus, any attempts by a sceptic to claim that the upstanding presentist understands (Q) differently from the eternalist is unjustified. The situation is different with respect to the nefarious presentist. It is at least open to the nefarious presentist *not to* construe “why” in (Q) as a request for an explanation *tied to a distinguishing feature*. After all, as pointed out above, the nefarious explanations hold *regardless* of the metaphysical theory in the background. Let us call a

¹⁷ If you accept the “ontologese” jargon (Dorr 2005), then the important fact is that they answer differently to (Q₁) when they speak ontologese, or — alternatively — when they are doing “metaphysical semantics” (Sider 2011).

nefarious presentist who does this move an *ostrich* presentist¹⁸. With respect to the ostrich, the sceptical worry can be replicated. In the case of the uncollaborative presentist, the charge was that the difference in understanding (Q₁) leads to answer with a compatible, or even an equivalent, content. In the case of the ostrich, the charge is that the difference in understanding (Q) leads to an equivalence in expressive powers of the theories. This equivalence of expressive power justifies the suspicion that the ostrich turns the difference in ontological commitment into a shallow distinction without any substantial content. What the eternalist does in terms of ontologically committing claims that quantify over past entities, the ostrich does in terms of ungrounded claims about the past. And this happens because — the presentist's own claim notwithstanding — there is an equivalence in content of claims such as (E-A) and (P-A).

The ostrich may reply to this charge as follows: she acknowledges that, in a sense, she and the eternalist agree on the answer to (Q); this is why ostrich presentism is no worse off with respect to explanatory power than eternalism. However, the ostrich position retains a distinction between what makes truths about the present true and what makes truths about the past true which reflects the central ontological distinction of presentism, and is not compatible with eternalism¹⁹. In other terms, the point of disagreement concerns whether TptECs require an explanation that is grounded in some metaphysically substantial feature or not. This is a meta-ontological, rather than ontological, disagreement if you wish, but it is indeed genuine, and motivated by the respective ontological beliefs (concerning what exists *simpliciter*).

I think this reply doesn't work. The sceptic in general doubts that the difference in what the two parties take to exist *simpliciter* is genuine, since both parties agree on what either existed, presently exists, or will exist. The anti-sceptic justifies her claim to the contrary by noting how different explanations to questions such as (Q) rely on what each party respectively takes to exist *simpliciter*. In the Quinean framework, the gain in extra explanatory power

¹⁸ I articulate more in detail, and argue against (through different but related arguments) the ostrich position in Torrenco 2015 (see also Torrenco 2012).

¹⁹ Cf. Bourne 2006: who stress the same point with respect to Ersatz presentism.

provides reasons for enlarging the ontology. By dropping the requirement of an explanatory speech that essentially appeals to a substantive feature of one's metaphysical position, the ostrich presentist refuses to acknowledge the gain in explanatory power as a justification for accepting new ontology or ideology. But, then, answering that *this* is precisely the difference between ostrich presentism and eternalism is tantamount to exiting the general methodological framework. Maybe the framework is broken and should be fixed or substituted. But I suspect that once we disentangle parsimony from explanatory power, little would be left of the whole enterprise of appraising different ontological positions. And if the ostrich were to reply "so much the worse for ontology and metaphysics", her position would be very close to a form of scepticism in disguise. In any case, as I said at the beginning, my results are intended to fit inside the broadly Quinean methodology.

VII. Final Remarks

The grounding problem is not the only problem with respect to which the difference between the presentist and the eternalist appears. There can be other metaphysical problems, which an ostrich presentist tackles by attributing a substantial explanatory role only to entities or properties that characterize her position. It will be noticed that the presentist usually takes tensed determinations to have an explanatory role in accounts of the truth of statements, whereas the eternalist usually does not²⁰. However, as I noted at the beginning of this paper, the distinction between the tensed and the tenseless views is at least partly independent from the *ontological* distinction between presentism and eternalism. Of course, the presentist may decide to drop the ontological distinction altogether, and to define her position in terms of tense, or some other element typical of the A-theory²¹. This would indeed allow her to meet the sceptical challenge and endorse an ostrich position, but only at the price of losing any claim to having a substantially different *ontology*

²⁰ On truth and the distinction between tensed and tenseless theories, see Dyke (2003). On tense realism and anti-realism, see Fine (2005).

²¹ Neil McKinnon (2013).

from the eternalist. If you care about ontology, this is throwing out the baby with the bath water.

To sum up. I started with two considerations: firstly, seemingly ontological debates may turn out to be shallow, and secondly, knock-down arguments against the sceptic, if there are any, are very rare. The best a metaphysician can do is to withstand the most serious challenge from scepticism. In this paper I have formulated a challenge that — I think — is potentially quite serious. I have argued that presentism in general has the resources to meet it, by answering the grounding problem with an explanation that makes an essential appeal to some substantive metaphysical doctrine. Thus, meeting the challenge brings in some cost. The ostrich presentist disagrees and claims the grounding problem can be solved without inflating the minimal presentist ontology and ideology. I have argued that this cannot be done while also meeting the challenge. The take-home message is the following: the anti-sceptic who is tempted by “the benefits of theft over honest toil” should take care not to end up leaving most of the riches to the sceptic.

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