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# There's No Future in No-Futurism

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**Abstract** In two recent papers Button (Analysis 66:130–135, 2006, Analysis 67:325–332, 2007) has developed a particular view of time that he calls no-futurism. He defends his no-futurism against a sceptical problem that has been raised (by e.g. Bourne in Aust J Phil 80:359–371, 2002) for a similar “growing block” view—that of Tooley (Time, tense, and causation, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1997). If Button is right, then we have an important third option available to us: a half-way house between presentism and eternalism. If, on the other hand, the criticism of Tooley-style “Growing-Block” views holds, then we are left with just presentism and eternalism. In this paper I show that Button’s defence fails.

## 1 The Problem

Tooley (1997: 1) maintains that ‘the past and present are real, but the future is not’. To be present, a time must be the last time that exists (1997: 195–196).<sup>1</sup> Button takes a *similar* view (see, e.g. Button, 2007: 325). A sceptical worry for such views is this:

- (i) Many past times exist, yet only one present time exists.
- (ii) We all, whether past or present, believe that we are present.
- (iii) Given the number of us who believe ourselves to be right at different times, the probabilities militate against our being right at *this* time.

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout, I identify this view as the “Growing-Block” view of time.

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Thus,

- (iv) Given our conviction that we are right about our being present, we ought to believe that the growing block view is false.<sup>2</sup>

To see the problem in more detail consider a token, U, of the sentence, ‘I am present’ that was uttered on Sunday. Suppose we are evaluating U on the subsequent Tuesday. The token U is only true, according to the Growing-Block view, if the days after Sunday do not exist. Since we are supposed to be evaluating U on Tuesday (which is after Sunday), so U is false. Thus, all present tensed beliefs had by those people who exist in the past, are false.<sup>3</sup> This gives us a base for an induction to the sceptical conclusion in (iv).

Before we move on, it’s perhaps worth considering why this *is* a problem. It’s tempting, after all, to deny that there’s a genuine problem here. It’s tempting to think that the argument is no more persuasive than the following: today is Monday; so all the people who ever thought that “today is Tuesday” were wrong, since today is Monday; this gives us strong inductive support for not believing that today is Tuesday also in future. Since this is obviously a poor argument, what is the difference between this and the argument proposed by Bourne et al.?

I take it that what proponents of the above sceptical induction find pressing concerns the function of the term “today”. Suppose that we’re eternalists.<sup>4</sup> We will then evaluate the truth or falsity of claims concerning whether “today is Tuesday” by means of something akin to a tenseless token reflexive analysis. That is to say that a token, *w*, of “today is Tuesday” is true iff *w* is simultaneous with Tuesday. After all, according to standard eternalism “the present” is no different, ontologically, from any other time. All times are on an ontological-par, if you will. Thus, according to the eternalist, no such argument can be put forward to any kind of sceptical conclusion.

For the Growing-Block theorist, however, matters are not so simple. According to the Growing-Block view, the past and present are real, but the future is not. More importantly, the locution “now” serves to pick out the time that is at the edge of this growing block; the “now” is the moment between the existent past and the non-existent future. Similarly, then, the term “today” will, given the Growing-Block view, serve to pick out the last *day* at the edge of the growing block. That is the semantic function of the locution “today”. Thus, when we assess the truth value of previous present tensed locutions, they seem, in our current context, to be false.

If that’s right, then although *as a matter of fact* we are correct in asserting that we exist “now”; given the proposed “Growing-Block” ontology, it turns out that those people who exist in the “block”, who also believe that they exist “now”, are wrong. They *do not* exist “now”, since to exist “now” is to exist at the edge of the block

<sup>2</sup> For discussion of the problem see, Bourne (2002), Braddon-Mitchell (2004), Button (2006, 2007: esp. p. 325), Tallant (2007).

<sup>3</sup> At least, those belief tokens that are not of the form of logical truths (for instance, “I am hungry or not hungry”) are false.

<sup>4</sup> That is, we believe that the past, present, and future are equally real.

and they reside in the body of the block. This gives us the basis for the sceptical induction.

## 2 The 'Solution'

According to Button (2006, 2007), we *cannot* say that U 'is false'. In order to say such a thing we'd have to accept that we can talk about such sentences tenselessly, or allow that their 'past existence' somehow qualifies them as existing as part of a presently existing whole. But this, Button thinks, is entirely wrong. As he puts it: 'the no futurist denies the possibility of a moment-invariant description of reality' (2007: 328). There *cannot* be a complete description of reality that is removed from a temporal perspective.

In order to evaluate U we must evaluate its truth in terms of how things *were*. This is what the present tensed core of U requires if it is to be properly evaluated. Of course, when Sunday *existed*, it *was* the last day in existence. So, rather than say that 'U is [tenselessly] false', we ought to say that U *was* true (2007: 326).

Why is this relevant to the sceptical problem? In order to generate the problem occupants of past times must *falsely* believe that they are present. This is what gives us a base for the induction to the sceptical conclusion that we, too, are most likely wrong. But if Button is right past people don't falsely believe that they are present. Instead, they *were* right to believe that, 'I am present'.

Button thinks that we can then use this pattern of reasoning to explain why no-futurism is immune to *all* sceptical challenges.<sup>5</sup> He (Button, 2007: 330) explains what he sees as the root of the problem. If (1) were true, Button (2007: 330) concedes, the no-futurist would face the sceptical problem.

- (1) there is [tenselessly] exactly one moment  $x$  such that any token of 'x is PRESENT', uttered at any moment  $y$ , is true.<sup>6</sup>

A perspective invariant description of reality would require that propositions are true at all times (2006: 133–134). Since U would not be true at all times, so we would face a problem.

But, and here is the key to the solution, as Button has it there is a nonsymmetric 'real-as-of' relation that times stand in to one another, such that past times are real-as-of present times, but present times are not real-as-of past times. This allows Button to say the following:

'since real-as-of is not symmetric, no-futurists instead endorse:

<sup>5</sup> Including the challenge I suggested in Tallant (2007).

<sup>6</sup> Where capitalisation is ontologically ascriptive—see Button (2007: 325–326). The idea, in brief, is that there might be two uses for tensed sentences. A merely indexical function, and a function that serves to point to some feature of the Growing Block Ontology. Thus, to say that a time is PRESENT is to say that it is the last moment of the PAST—of the block. When we evaluate our predecessors use of the term 'present' it is tempting to view it as a merely indexical term: that is, since the term no longer picks out the Growing Block theorist's present (the last moment of the PAST), so they are merely 'present' where we are, now, PRESENT.

- (2) as-of any moment  $y$ , there is exactly one moment  $x$  such that any token of ‘ $x$  is PRESENT’ uttered at  $y$  [is/was] true’ (2007: 330)<sup>7</sup>

This, Button thinks, is unproblematic. It entails that

- (3) for any moment  $x$ , any token of ‘ $x$  is PRESENT’ uttered at  $x$  [is/was] true. (op cit)

There are, then, two components to the proposed solution: the asymmetry of the real-as-of relation and a move to all verbs being tensed. First, the asymmetry of the real-as-of relation allows us to say that tensed beliefs *were* true, since what *is now* the case is not relevant to the evaluation of a past, present tensed sentence. Second, by denying that there are tenseless verbs we deny that there is a single perspective invariant description of reality and so we deny that only one time is [tenselessly] present. This, at least, is Button’s (2006: 132–134, 2007: 331) claim.<sup>8</sup>

Unfortunately, no-futurism is untenable. Button, as we have seen, thinks that all verbs are tensed (2007: 331). There’s an important exception to the rule:

The ‘is’ in ‘ $x$  is real-as-of-  $y$ ’ is neither tensed nor tenseless. The relation ‘ $x$  is real-as-of  $y$ ’ is a primitive of no futurism, and the verb it includes is part of that primitive’. (2007: 351)

Button himself suggests that the “real-as-of” relation might be the most apposite point of attack for critics of no-futurism. As a critic, I shall follow Button’s advice. There are a number of problems with this aspect of no-futurism.

A natural way to start would be to object that to say that a verb is *tenseless* is to say that it lacks tense: this is what is meant by the term “tenseless”. Thus, for Button to say that there is this third grammatical category that is lacking in tense, but not *tenseless appears* to be to commit to a contradiction.

However, this is unduly harsh on Button. Perhaps we have the resources to understand the distinctions he wishes to draw, even if the terms he has used are not the most perspicuous. Button states (2006, 131–132; 2007, 331) that a tenseless token  $P$  is tenselessly true iff: “for all  $t$  real-as-of  $P$ ,  $P$  is/was/will be (tensed, and as appropriate) true at  $t$ ”. This permits a three-fold distinction.

- (i) Tenseless verbs that are true at all times (e.g. Universal generalisations)
- (ii) The verb “...is real as of...”, which although lacking tense does not permit the construction of sentences that are true at all times.
- (iii) Tensed verbs

That doesn’t require Button to argue that there are verbs that are neither tensed nor tenseless and so avoids the problem stated above. If that’s the right way to read Button, then, I think, problems can be raised. In the first section I argue that Button’s view requires an unprecedented revision to our language that, as I demonstrate in 4 and 5, appears entirely unmotivated and in fact commits us to a further epistemic problem. In the latter sections of the paper I look to strengthen the

<sup>7</sup> Where italicised verbs are tensed.

<sup>8</sup> I should make it clear that Button never actually goes as far as to endorse no-futurism. Rather, he only intends to offer a defence of the view against the sceptical objection.

concerns with no-futurism by detailing just how counter-intuitive the view really is. These arguments lead, I suggest, to our being best served by claiming that there is no future in Button's no futurism.

### 3 Unprecedented Linguistic Revisionism

As noted above, all verbs in natural languages are either tensed or tenseless; there *is* no third grammatical category. As Lyons (1985: 679) has it: “[a] tenseless sentence is, quite simply, a sentence without tense”. Further, interrogation of texts dealing with the logico-linguistic construction of languages reveals discussion of only tensed and tenseless constructions.<sup>9</sup> On the assumption that such texts are exhaustive (or, as a collective, may be taken to be exhaustive) it is reasonable to think that our language admits of no such category.

Strictly speaking, then, Button's theory cannot be stated. Declaring that the verb is part of the primitive, as Button does, makes no difference.<sup>10</sup> For instance, were we asked to consider a theory, T, which posited the clearly ungrammatical, H: ‘the is brown universal’, we should be obliged to deny theory T: we literally cannot make sense of H. Since verbs that are ‘neither tensed nor tenseless’ aren't a feature of our language, locutions containing them are as meaningless as H.

Although Button partially anticipates this objection, his response is inadequate. He says, ‘it is clearly therefore nonsensical to demand that the relation itself must be either tensed or tenseless’ (2007: 331). That is to miss the point. The objection turns on whether or not our language incorporates verbs that are neither tensed, nor tenseless. Since it does not, Button's view simply cannot be stated.

However, we might yet think that a reply is in the offing. Typically, if a natural language lacks a required device, then we simply augment the language in question. So, then: if our language lacks this third category of verb, why not simply augment our natural language?

Although I'll argue extensively below that we are best served by denying no-futurism, I begin with an historical point intended to reveal the magnitude of Button's intended move.

It's true to say that where languages lack a particular required device, we typically augment the language, it is not true to say that languages have been augmented *by the addition of an grammatical category* (at least, not beyond the point of construction of said language). To be clear, “grammatical category” is intended to point to the fact that particular ways that we have of using the language

<sup>9</sup> For instance, Huddleston (1984: 134–135) notes only two types of verb-phrase: tensed and non-tensed; Langendoen (1970: 189–191) argues that *all* English sentences include tense, though is prepared to concede that the present tense can be used to express “generic” claims using a “timeless predicate” (as in “A mirror reflects light”); Declerck (1991: 7) draws a distinction between tensed and tenseless sentences, but mentions no other category. No text that I have been able to find makes mention of the kind of verb Button requires: e.g. Hudson (1971), Radford (2009: esp. p. 3).

<sup>10</sup> I concede that I'm not entirely certain that I understand what it actually means to treat a verb “as part of a primitive”. I *assume* that what Button means is that there is some primitive notion expressed by “is-real-as-of” and that the expression of that notion requires that the ‘is’ as a component part of the expression and that, as such, there is nothing to be said concerning the tense, or otherwise, of the term.

admit of particular distinctions: a noun can be marked (semantically) as either a singular or plural term; but not both or neither. We cannot have a referring expression that is *neither* singular nor plural. We exhaust the ways in which nouns can be deployed when we consider:

The dog is barking; and,

The dogs *are* barking

Verbs, much like nouns, are features of our language. The category “verb” then admits of two further sub-categories: tensed; tenseless. There is no other way to deploy a verb within the English language.

Now philosophers themselves invent many terms. “Grue” is a paradigm case. The predicate “is Grue” is intended to denote a property of an object that appears as one colour (green) before a particular date, and another colour (blue) after a particular date. Since our language lacked any term for such a predicate, so Goodman’s (1955) study of induction, in which the predicate is first coined, required the invention of a new term in order to describe said (possible) phenomena.

Notice, though, that although the predicate itself is certainly novel, it does *not* require the invention of a new *grammatical category*. We are not required to say, for instance, that nouns can now be deployed as neither singular, nor plural, but as something else altogether.

So I accept, for instance, that supervaluationists about vagueness may not find evidence for their view in linguistics text-books, but I see that issue as rather different from the one under consideration. The supervaluationist does not require us to fix upon a particular feature of our grammar (verbs, nouns, adverbs, etc.), and then require of us that we find a new grammatical sub-category of one of these existing grammatical categories. Rather, according to supervaluationism “a sentence is true if and only if it is true on all ways of making it precise, false iff it is false on all those ways and neither true nor false otherwise.” (Keefe, 2008: 316) Although such moves require us to modify our pre-theoretic attitudes as to whether (and how) sentences are true and false, they do not require us to invent a new sub-category of verb.

Scientists also invent terms. In the 1930s, in the face of the need to explain the conservation of momentum, physicists posited a new particle: the neutrino. The term “neutrino” was an augmentation of the language of physics, since prior to this point in the history of science, we lacked a term for such a particle. Once again, though, notice that the augmentation of our language with a new term *does not* require the addition of a *new grammatical category*.

What both of these cases point to is that there are no analogous cases available to Button where philosophical development has required the introduction of a new grammatical category or sub-category. Button’s claim that the “no futurist” requires a new grammatical category is entirely without precedent. That needn’t be fatal, of course, but it ought to be quite striking. *No other* philosophical or scientific discovery has required the invention of a new type of verb; even new modifications to existing verbs simply require that existing verbs fall under pre-existing categories. What is supposed to be so special about no-futurism?

What Button requires, then, is an amendment to our natural language that is *entirely* without precedent in the history of philosophy and science, and it is an amendment that receives no obvious support from the way in which our own language is currently evolving. This at least *looks* like a case of special pleading; but where no pleading has been done. So, where is the motivation for this radical proposal?

The trouble is that it does not appear that there *are* any good reasons to think endorse no-futurism. My first concern (next section) is that even if Button has solved one epistemic problem, he has simply replaced it with another. My second concern, which follows in the next section, is that it's *simply not clear* that we have any reason to think that time has the structure the no-futurist thinks that it has.

#### 4 The New Epistemic Problem

The whole of this debate has centred upon our capacity to render it true that, at any time, we are correct in our belief that “this time is present”. What we must now look at is how we have secured this result in no-futurism. It would seem that, at any time, what “makes true” our belief is that the time of our belief is the last one that is “real-as-of” any other. Thus, here, in 2009, my belief that “2009 is present” is made true by 2009 being real-as-of itself *only*; 2009, unlike 2008, is not real-as-of any other times.

Now that we have granted that this belief *is* always true, whenever the belief is had, we probably owe an explanation of *why* it is that we hold the belief to be true. We surely owe some explanation of this surprising fact! For both presentism and eternalism the explanation approaches a truism—and this is perhaps why the issue is not typically discussed in the literature. For the presentist, being *just is* being present. So whenever I exist, I think that “this time is present”, and form that belief *precisely because* whenever I exist, we detect the existence, that is “presence”, of that time. For the eternalist, being present is (typically) just a matter of the token uttered being simultaneous with itself. Since we can detect simultaneity, and we notice that any *entity*, including a belief, is always simultaneous with itself, according to the B-theorist, so we form the belief that “this time is present”. Everything is very straightforward.<sup>11</sup>

But, according to Button, being present is a matter of being at a time that is only real-as-of itself. Thus, to detect the “presence” of my current time would be to experience that time *as* being *only* real-as-of itself.

It seems obviously false to say that we can detect the real-as-of relation *at all*. Certainly, I have no idea of how such a relation would appear to an observer. Further, how could we experience, not only the relation, but that *this* time is the time that is real-as-of only itself? Simply, I know of no way to explain how this is the case. Finally, the relation *surely* cannot be causally efficacious.

<sup>11</sup> See Oaklander and White (2007) for discussion of our awareness of the B-theoretic structure of reality.



Suppose that I drop my cup on the floor and that the cup shatters upon impact. If the real-as-of relation *is* causally efficacious the cup, then it ought to be possible for it to make some contribution to how the cup behaves upon impacting with the floor. However, no contribution *is* made by the relation. Rather, the cup has certain (non-temporal) properties; the floor has certain (non-temporal) properties; there are certain law-like features of the world that ensure that when we bring the cup and floor together in the way described above, the cup will break.

Short of allowing that the relation systematically over-determines the effects generated by an objects' other properties,<sup>12</sup> there's no conceptual space for a real-as-of to play a causal role in the process of the cup breaking or in any other causal process.<sup>13</sup>

Of course if it turned out that the relation *is* undetectable, then it would be most surprising that so many of us hold the belief that, at whatever time we exist, "this time is present". It would be nothing more than an unexplained coincidence that this turned out to be the case. Since wide-scale unexplained coincidences are to be avoided where possible, so, I suggest, no-futurism is also to be avoided.

There's a natural reply in the vicinity, though it fails. Surely, whenever I have the belief "this time is present" that belief is true, because whenever I have that belief, the time at which I have it is real-as-of only itself. *That* is what explains why I think that the belief is true.

The natural reply fails because it misidentifies the problem. The natural reply tells us, in effect, that we believe that "this time is present" because "this time is present" is always true. But that a proposition is true does not explain why we believe it. For instance, that it is true that "there is a cup on my desk" does not explain why I believe that "there is a cup on my desk". Rather, what explains my having the belief is that I stand in various causal relations to both the cup and my desk; that I have particular cognitive and linguistic capacities; that the lighting conditions are normal etc. What, then, are we to say about *why* we all believe that "this time is present" if the presence of any moment consists in it standing in the relation of "real-as-of" only to itself? I can see no answer forthcoming because the relation itself is surely not causally efficacious.<sup>14</sup>

## 5 Motivation

When we agree to some modification of our language, we do so only when there is a need to do so. But Button has not presented us with any such analogous "need". The dialectical situation is this: there exists the original sceptical problem for the no-futurist. *The only way in which the no-futurist can block this move is by way of*

<sup>12</sup> See Sider (2003) for a discussion of the problems of overdetermination.

<sup>13</sup> Obviously, the case should generalise, too. That is, there is no conceptual space in *any* causal process for the property of presentness to play a role.

<sup>14</sup> The argument is structurally similar to that offered by Liggins (2006) against abstract objects.

recourse to an *otherwise* ad hoc amendment to the English language, a move that no other position in the metaphysics of time will endorse (since no other view, including Tooley's growing block model, incorporates such a "real-as-of" relation). Not only is this the case, but as we saw in (3) it is apparent that Button requires, not *merely* a new term, but a new grammatical category. Thus, *the no futurist* requires an augmentation to the grammar of our language: all other positions do not. This must, surely, be a mark in favour of existing theories. We also saw, in (4) that there are additional problems to be faced.

In any case, let us put this into context. The manoeuvre that Button requires of us is *entirely* without precedent in the history of philosophy and science. What is motivating this move is nothing other than that otherwise, no-futurism fails (or at least falls foul of the sceptical objection stated in section one). Notably, it's unclear what benefits are supposed to follow from *Button's* no-futurism since his position is now demonstrably distinct from that of Tooley (1997).<sup>15</sup>

So, are there advantages of Tooley's model that cannot be preserved by Button? It would appear so. Tooley (1997: 299–300 summarises matters) thinks that we can use causal priority to analyse temporal priority and thereby gain a number of advantages. For instance, the analysis: 'entails that temporal relations do possess the formal or structural properties that they are normally believed to do' (1997: 299); we have an explanation of the similarity of the formal properties of causal and temporal relations (1997: 299); an explanation of why propositions such as <no cause is later than its effect> are necessarily true—if temporal relations *are* causal relations then the proposition will be analytically true (1997: 299); we have an explanation of the all pervasive nature of the direction of time—'a causal theory of time, ..., ensures that the direction of time is such a pervasive fact, for, wherever there is causation, there is temporal direction' (1999: 300).

Now, of course, Button thinks that the 'is-real-as-of' relation is a primitive relation, *and it is this relation that 'carries in its wake' the truth of our other temporal locutions*. If that is right, then it is hard to see how we can view Button's no-futurism as a causal theory of time; the fundamental relation is not causal, but the primitive 'is-real-as-of'. All of the advantages that Tooley, here, advances as reason to adopt his model, will fall by the wayside in Button's no-futurism, for they all stem from analysing priority in terms of causal priority.

It's hard to see, then, why we might be tempted to think that augmenting our language with a new grammatical category is the right move to make. Indeed, in the next two sections I argue that, quite apart from not having supplied us with any motivation to endorse no-futurism, that it commits us to a deeply suspicious 'real-as-of' relation, and that Button's view commits us to very strange views about the truth values of particular sentences.

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<sup>15</sup> Tooley, of course, gives us a sustained defence of his view and an excellent account of the erstwhile benefits. But since Button's account is not Tooley's, it remains to be seen what, exactly, is motivating Button's view. Of course, that's not to say that nothing is motivating Button's view; merely that at the current time we have not been told.

## 6 A Non-Symmetric Existential Notion

In this section I discuss some potential difficulties with the non-symmetric existential relation “real-as-of”.<sup>16</sup> In doing so, I again follow Button’s suggestion that this relation may turn out to be the Achilles heel of no-futurism.

It is now true that “1980 is-real-as-of 2009”. In 1980, of course, we could not truthfully say that “2009-is-real-as-of 1980” because the existential relation “is-real-as-of” is non-symmetric and 2009 is not real-as-of 1980.

Now, I think that there’s a natural objection to Button’s view. In 2009 it’s *tempting* to say that, in at least some sense or other, there is a non-symmetric relation “is-real-as-of” which relates our time to 2009. That is, although we’re on ‘the wrong end of’ the relation, nonetheless this relation really is relating our time to 2009.

But this is where things get murky. Given Button’s semantics, we cannot in fact say that 2009 *is now* real-as-of 2009 because “now” is to be evaluated at the time of utterance and, at this time, only 2009 and earlier times are real. Likewise, we cannot say that 2009 is *tenselessly* real-as-of 2009 because a tenseless locution is a universal generalisation and so true at all times. Since the real-as-of relation is non-symmetric, so 2009 cannot *now* be said to be real-as-of 2009 and so “2009 is real-as-of 2009” is not true at all times. That being the case, it cannot be tenselessly true.

Button (2007: 331) tries to tackle the concern: “some may object that it is impossible for  $x$  to exist relative to  $y$ , without  $y$  existing relative to  $x$ ”. He goes on,

But why should it be unacceptable to relativize existence? The relation ‘ $x$  exists relative to  $y$ ’ is still, for the no-futurist, symmetric within moments, so synchronic metaphysics is unaffected. No-futurists are simply telling us to take seriously the idea that reality as a whole differs from moment to moment. To maintain that this idea is implausible is just to refuse to engage with tensed theories of time altogether.

Button is, of course, quite incorrect if he means to imply in the last sentence that, if one denies that there is an asymmetric notion of existence, that one is simply refusing to engage with tensed theories of time. Presentists, for instance, allow that only the present exists, and argue that the whole of reality differs from moment to moment.

Further, contra Button, no-futurists are *not* simply telling us to take seriously the idea that “reality as a whole differs from moment to moment”; they are asking us to stomach a deeply unintuitive, asymmetric relation of existence.

Is such a notion really counterintuitive? I think that it is, and I don’t think that Button truly acknowledges just how counterintuitive the view is in his earlier papers. There’s a nagging suspicion that lingers (in my mind at least) that there is a *sense* in which we ought to be able to articulate something like the following:

<sup>16</sup> Though something of a cheap-shot it’s perhaps worth pointing out that there are substantial arguments against the existence of asymmetric relations that Button may need to deal with. For instance, Williamson (1985) and Fine (2000).

SUSPICION: Look, I accept that this non-symmetric existential relation limits “what exists” *in a sense*, but there’s another sense in which it does not. That is, when we ask what *really in totality* exists, we mean what exists *at all times*. Since my time is existentially related to earlier times, by the “is-real-as-of” relation, so at these earlier times, I *am* a part of reality. After all, I’m existentially related to those times. I grant the no futurist that *there’s a sense in which that’s wrong*. It’s wrong because the existential relation the no futurist offers is non-symmetric; but if the relation relates me to that time, which it does, then it relates that time to me. Even if the relation is non-symmetric, that surely still follows.<sup>17</sup> And if the relation *does* relate that earlier time to me and me to that earlier time then there ought to be a sense in which we can say that the current time is a part of how things have been. That being the case, there’s a *sense* in which the I was a part of how the world was.

The sentiment is, I think, extremely appealing.

I know of no way to articulate the objection more forcefully, or of any way to show that this commits Button to a contradiction. I cannot, surely, *insist* that SUSPICION is true. Nevertheless, SUSPICION *seems* a highly intuitive principle. In particular, the claim that *since my time is existentially related to earlier times, by the “is-real-as-of” relation, so at those earlier times, I am a part of reality. After all, I’m existentially related to those times*. Even if that relation is non-symmetric, it’s hard to make sense of how this intuition is to be denied.

And I think perhaps that this will suffice to offer as an objection to Button. Button requires us to adopt a highly *unintuitive* reading of the non-symmetric existential relation. To the extent that the preservation of intuition is of some non-zero weighting in the evaluation of metaphysical theories, this counts as a black mark against no-futurism.

## 7 Talking About Times

I want to begin the analysis in this section with a comment on a point that Button makes concerning the relationship between the “is-real-as-of” relation and tensed and tenseless sentences. As Button (2007: 331) has it:

Tense and PRESENTNESS supervene upon real-as-of relations, and tenseless truths (i.e. truths that are true at every moment) follow in their wake.

That cannot be quite right, for in his papers (as Button (2007: 328) concedes) Button gives us no account of talk about the future. As I’ll demonstrate in a moment, that looks as if it might raise independent concerns, but for now I want to focus upon Button’s just quoted claim that tenseless truths somehow “follow in the wake” of the real-as-of relation.

<sup>17</sup> See for instance, Williamson (1985: 251). Thus, if my fork is “to the left of” my knife then although it’s clearly false to say that my knife is thereby “to the left of” my fork, it’s also clearly true to say that my knife is such that “my fork is to the left of it”.

Consider the sentence,  $p$ , “the battle of Hastings is earlier than the First World War”. I assume that  $p$  is true. Of course,  $p$  is an archetypal tenseless sentence: if true at all, it is always true. However, on Button’s view, it is not true at all times. Consider a token of  $p$ , call it  $u$ , uttered in 1913, prior to the outbreak of the First World War. At that time,  $u$  is false as there *is* no such thing as the First World War. Recall, we are to evaluate the truth of sentences in virtue of what is “real-as-of” their moment of utterance.

Now consider another token of  $p$ , call it  $v$ , uttered in 1919, after the end of the First World War. At that time,  $v$  is true. This clearly establishes that the sentence type  $p$  is not tenseless on Button’s model, but is a sentence type whose truth-value changes over time. This is a bad result. The view of presentist, eternalist (and, I assume, everyone else) is that the sentence “the battle of Hastings is earlier than the First World War” is, if true at all, then true at all times.

I see no good way for Button to respond. We have, as per his insistence, evaluated the tokens at their time of utterance. We surely cannot say that the “is” in “is earlier than” is *tensed*—nothing, I assume, is *now* earlier than anything else, since if two things are present then neither is earlier than the other. We have established that the “is” cannot be tenseless since the sentence type changes its truth value over time. The only other option is to insist that the “is” is neither tensed nor tenseless. But *surely* we cannot take this path. To assume that *another* verb is neither tensed nor tenseless and, thus, is accorded the status of “primitive” must be a stretch too far. We must stop deploying primitives *at some point*. In any case, the “is” in “is earlier than” is *clearly* an instance of a tenseless locution. We simply have no reason to deny that this is the case other than to continue in an abortive effort to rescue some vestige of Button’s no futurism. So, unless we are to first assume Button’s view true then I can think of no reason to think that “is earlier than” is anything other than a tenseless locution. Since I have no reason to assume Button’s view true, so I think it generates the wrong results with respect to “is earlier than”. Because of this, I suggest, we have *another* instance of no-futurism generating a counterintuitive result.

The natural move, then, is for Button to argue that the truth-value of this sort of tenseless sentence is determined, in part, by the truth-value of various future tensed sentences. Thus, Button may say *something like*:

Event  $e$  is earlier than event\* iff when  $e$  is present,  $e^*$  is future and when  $e$  is past,  $e^*$  is present or future and when  $e$  is future,  $e^*$  is future (c.f. Craig 2000: 153)

But then two points become clear. First, it is *not* simply true to say, as Button does, that the semantics for tenseless claims such as “The battle of Hastings is earlier than the First World War” follow in the wake of the “real-as-of” relation. It *appears*, certainly, that some tenseless truths will depend upon what “will be the case”, and it’s certainly hard to see how that can be related to the “real-as-of-relation”. After all, future times cannot be said to exist *in any sense*, since the “real-as-of” relation is supposedly asymmetric.

Indeed, it seems apposite to remark upon the likely viability of Button being able to provide a non-ad-hoc semantics for future tense sentences. Recall Button’s statement of the truth-conditions for previously tokened present tensed sentences:

- (3) for any moment  $x$ , any token of ' $x$  is PRESENT' uttered at  $x$  [is/was] true.  
(op cit)

Consider, then, a future-tense token,  $z$ , "it will rain tomorrow" uttered by an agent; Charles. Suppose that Charles uttered  $z$  on Monday; on Tuesday it rained. What has been key to Button's "solution" is that past and present tensed sentences are evaluated with respect to the time at which they are uttered. That being the case, it would seem apt to evaluate  $z$  as false: after all, at the time of utterance the future is not "real-as-of" the time of utterance and so is no part of the domain.

But consider, then, a particularly intuitive claim regarding  $z$ , to wit: "it turned out that what Charles said was true", more colloquially; "Charles was right". This claim is, I take it, perfectly apt. What Charles described was it raining on a particular day, and on that day it did indeed rain. We seem entitled then to express our agreement with Charles' earlier claim.

It's hard to see, though, how Button will preserve this intuitive truth-value. On Monday, the time of utterance (and hence our assumed time of evaluation) Tuesday, is not real-as-of Monday. Thus, what Charles said was not true. Once again, what we find is an intuitive cost to Button's view, with no obvious motivation for no-futurism on the horizon.

Three "escape routes" leap to mind, none seems especially palatable. First, Button might deny that future tense utterances need to be evaluated with respect to the time of their utterance. Instead, they are to be evaluated with respect to the time *that they are about*. Thus, at the moment at which Charles utters  $z$ , we must withhold any evaluation of the truth of  $z$ , since it lacks any subject.

I don't think this option is tempting. First, it is clearly in need of refinement since some sentences "about" the future clearly *are* true: "there will be a sea battle tomorrow, or there will not be a sea battle tomorrow" is clearly a sentence *about* the future, but is surely not a sentence lacking a truth value. Second, and more pressing, we have yet to be told why past and present tensed sentences are to be evaluated with respect to the time of their tokening, but future tensed sentences are not. This *appears* to be an *ad hoc* stipulation. We may grant, of course, that the truth-conditions of past and future tensed sentences are different: that much is unsurprising. But what *is* counterintuitive, and as yet unexplained, is why future tensed tokens are to be evaluated not, as other tensed sentences, at the time at which they are uttered, but at the time at which they are about. Given the already steep cost of no-futurism, it would be best, I think, to avoid this route.

The second "escape route" that Button has is to deny that my retrospective claim, that "it turned out that what Charles said was true" is in fact true. In arguing such, Button might concede that this is to bite the bullet, but argue that it is no substantial bullet to feast upon. Thus, Button might argue that although what Charles said *was* false, were someone to now say 'it is raining' they would say something true. So what we find ourselves committed to is that, if someone were now to say "it is raining", they would say something true. That's all that we are getting at.

I'll make two points by way of reply. First, if asked to apportion credences I'd be more confident that "it turned out that what Charles said was true" is correct, than I would be both that no-futurism is true and that our language requires augmentation

via the addition of a new grammatical category. It is simply too much of a stretch to believe that so much re-writing of our language is required when we haven't been given any reason to think no-futurism is true. Second, it is surely the function of our semantics and metaphysics to explain how it is our true sentences end up true. In failing to do this—by failing to preserve the truth of 'what Charles said was true'—Button's view fails. After all, Button has simply failed to preserve the intuitive truth-value of the sentence under consideration.

The third "escape route" Button has available is to posit some presently existing truth-makers for talk about the future. One such strategy, for instance, would be to endorse future-tense Lucretian properties such that, on Monday, *the world* instantiates the property "going to be rainy on Tuesday".<sup>18</sup> This would generate the result that Charles' utterance *was true*.

This final route seems more plausible, though carries with it a certain dialectical cost. If we're prepared to invoke Lucretian properties *at all* then why not posit them in the place of the "existent" past? That is, why not simply adopt presentism and say that talk about the past is grounded by "past-tense" Lucretian properties? We can then say "there were dinosaurs" is true because the world now instantiates the property "having contained dinosaurs".

My point is not, of course, that the Lucretian solution is correct. Rather, my claim is more modest: if the no-futurist hauls in ontological resources available to the presentist in order to solve the problem of talk about the future, then that solution ought to serve equally well when it comes to talk about the past. So yes, we might have a "solution" to the problem of talk about the future (and perhaps also of "tenseless" sentences), but we do so at the cost of making presentism seem that much more appealing.

In any case, and drawing this section to a close, what is becoming abundantly clear is that there are a number of substantial costs associated with no-futurism and, as we have seen from previous sections, little apparent motivation.

## 8 A Possible Reply: How to Think of 'The Verb'?

Through this section 'the verb' refers to the 'is' in Button's primitive locution, 'is real as of'. We might think to try and rescue Button's view by suggesting, contra Button, that 'the verb' is tensed. This would give us two potential readings of 'the verb': present tensed or tensed disjunctive.<sup>19</sup> Neither view is satisfactory.

Suppose that we allow that 'the verb' is present tensed. That would give us the result that the past is-now real-as-of the present. That's false since tensed terms are supposed to be ontologically ascriptive on Button's view.<sup>20</sup> 'The past' isn't *now*

<sup>18</sup> See Bigelow (1996) for an introduction to the idea of Lucretian properties and Sider (2001: 41), Merricks (2007: Chap. 6) and Cameron (forthcoming) for discussion.

<sup>19</sup> As we saw above, Button himself has ruled out the possibility of permitting tenseless verbs on the grounds that they generate the sceptical problem. As he puts it, '[t]ense is plainly indispensable to this solution' (Button 2006: 133).

<sup>20</sup> Button (2007: 330) suggests that we must treat tensed verbs as ontologically ascriptive in order to resist Tallant's (2007) attack on Button's (2006) position.

anything at all. 'The past', if we can talk in such terms, is simply that which *was* the case.

Nor will it help Button if we allow that 'the verb' is tensed disjunctive, such that 'the past' either is-now, was, or will be, real-as-of the present.<sup>21</sup> It's not the case that the past *was* real-as-of the present since that would require the real-as-of relation to be symmetrical. Nor is it the case that the past is *now* real-as-of the present, as we've already seen. So unless we can read the 'is' in is-real-as-of as tenseless, we can't formulate the view. Of course, if we allow that the 'is' in is-real-as-of is tenseless, then there are times that are a part of a whole and there are people at some of those past times who's tensed beliefs—'I am present', for instance—are clearly false when assessed as ontologically ascriptive. We are back with the original problem once more. Thus, there is no solution to the problem and, as a result, no future in no-futurism.

## 9 A (Small) Victory for Presentism?

Button has failed to provide a solution to the sceptical problem since his no-futurism is untenable. The result of these arguments is that presentism and eternalism remain our two candidates for the correct philosophy of time. Also noteworthy, though, is the fact that this is a victory for presentism over other tensed theories of time. Versions of eternalism that attempt to posit an A-theoretic structure will also fall foul of the above problem.<sup>22</sup>

For instance, if we allow that tensed verbs are ontologically ascriptive *and* that many times exist, then we must allow that occupants of times other than those worthy of the ontologically ascriptive term 'present', all believe falsely when they believe that 'I am present'.<sup>23</sup> Since this generates the sceptical conclusion detailed above, so non-presentist tensed theories of time are to be rejected. So, if you find so-called 'tensed' views of time at all attractive, and many do, then you should be a presentist.

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<sup>21</sup> I ignore the future-tensed option, here, since the no-futurist denies the reality of the future.

<sup>22</sup> For instance, the view espoused by Lowe (1998: 88–94).

<sup>23</sup> Candidate eternalist A-theorists include Lowe (1998: 88–96) and Fine (2005: chapter 8).



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