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## *(Existence) Presentism and the A-theory*

JONATHAN TALLANT

### 1. Introduction

Rasmussen (2012) argues that there is a version of presentism that is not a version of the A-theory. In this article I demonstrate that Rasmussen's argument fails, but that we can establish the same conclusion by other means. I first lay out Rasmussen's argument (§2) and show how it fails (§3). I then (§4) offer a new statement of presentism that is incompatible with the A-theory, which I call 'Existence Presentism', and (§5) clarify Existence Presentism.

### 2. Rasmussen's argument

Roughly, the A-properties are the properties *being past*, *being present* and *being future*. The B-relations are the relations *being earlier than* and *being later than*. Borrowing from Markosian (2010), Rasmussen claims that A-theorists endorse (A):

(A) Facts about A-properties are not reducible to facts about B-relations (i.e. facts such as *earlier than* or *later than*) and/or B-properties.

Rasmussen's goal is to provide us with a version of presentism – the view that only present objects exist – that doesn't satisfy (A). In outline, Rasmussen thinks that an ersatz presentism – according to which times are abstract objects/maximal propositions – of a similar kind to that defended by

Crisp (2007) is presentist but not A-theoretic. In more detail, the metaphysic that Rasmussen (2012: 273) recommends is:

- (1) Times are abstract objects/maximal propositions that bear primitive earlier than/later than relations to one another
- (2) There is always only one time that is true
- (3) Times change in a Cambridge way, such that a time that is 7 years earlier than a time that is true becomes 6 years earlier than a time that is true
- (4) Being present and presently existing are distinct: all times presently exist, but only one of them *is present*: in lieu of the latter we may say that ‘x is a time and x is true’

Rasmussen’s thought is this: the primitive earlier than/later than relations that obtain between abstract times can be used to reductively analyse the A-properties. Since we can analyse the A-properties in terms of B-relations, so we can reduce the A-properties to the B-relations – thus, presentists can deny (A). To give an example of such a reduction: suppose that time  $t$  is present (and hence, true). Some other time,  $t^*$ , ‘is future’. This futurity can be reductively analysed. The analysis takes the form:  $t^*$  is future iff  $t$  is true and  $t^*$  is later than  $t$ .<sup>1</sup>

Rasmussen claims not to defend ersatz presentism. Instead, he merely intends to offer an argument of the form: ‘if ersatz presentism is open for discussion and debate, then so, too, is a tenseless version of presentism’ (2012: 273). I will now show that ersatz presentism is not presentism if its B-relations are genuine and that it is still an A-theory if the B-relations are ersatz.

### 3. *Against Rasmussen*

There are two ways to understand (1). We could think that the B-relations that Rasmussen talks of are *genuine* B-relations (of the sort posited by the B-theorist – e.g. Oaklander (2004)), or we could think of these as somehow *ersatz* B-relations. Neither reading is compatible with Rasmussen’s position.

According to the first reading of (1), the presentist commits to ersatz times being *genuinely* later than and earlier than one another. This view faces an obvious objection. If two ersatz times are (substantially) earlier than or later than one another, then they cannot both presently exist. After all, if we say (as we surely must) that the ersatz time that represents the time at which the big bang occurred is 14 billion years ‘earlier than’ the ersatz time that

1 As a referee pointed out to me, it’s not clear that anything in the above permits Rasmussen to reductively analyse the property of *presence* in terms of B-relations. We’re simply told that the presence of a time is to be understood in terms of a particular time’s *being true*. *Being true* is not, obviously, a B-theoretic relation.

represents the present time, and conjoin that to the thesis that everything that exists does so presently, that seemingly requires us to commit to the *presence* of a 14 billion year duration – such a view is not presentism.

The obvious response to this concern, from the ersatz, takes its cue from remarks due to Crisp (2007: 103).

... times are like the actualist's worlds: The actualist says that everything is actual. Nevertheless, she believes that some worlds are merely possible. What gives? She'll explain it thus: Everything is actual<sub>1</sub>, where something *x* is actual<sub>1</sub> iff, according to the actual<sub>2</sub> world, *x* exists, and something *y* is actual<sub>2</sub> iff *y* obtains or is instantiated or is true (depending on your brand of actualism). Though all possible worlds are actual<sub>1</sub>, most aren't actual<sub>2</sub> – or as it's usually put, most are merely possible.) (2007: 103)

Crisp's distinction between some *x* being 'actual<sub>1</sub>' and it being 'actual<sub>2</sub>' is analogous to Rasmussen's distinction between 'presently existing' and 'being present', for Rasmussen (2012: 3) claims that every time 'presently exists', but that not every time is present. Indeed, only one time is ever present. In Rasmussen's terms, recall, only one time is such that it 'is true' (cf. (4) in §2). Thus, 'actual<sub>1</sub>' is analogous to Rasmussen's 'presently existing', and 'actual<sub>2</sub>' to 'being present'.

In any case, the core of this response is simply to re-package the move made by the modal ersatz in temporal terms. We can concede that not all times are present, because some of them are B-related to the present time. But it still turns out that every time 'presently exists', even if not every time is not thereby 'present'.

The trouble is that this response focuses on times and abstract times, and *not* on the B-relation. My concern is not that some times can 'presently exist' without 'being present'. This, on its own, is of no concern. We are already aware, from studies of ersatz theories of modality, that sets of propositions or sentences can represent how the world is at *all* times, for ersatzism has the power to model whole possible worlds. It is of no surprise, then, that we can instead represent how the world is at each specific time.

My concern arises when we add the B-relations to these abstract times and declare the abstract times the relata of these relations. Let me explain. The B-relation posited is supposedly a genuine *earlier than* or *later than* relation. We know various things about the B-relation from study of the B-theory. One of the things that we know about B-relations is that if two objects are related by a B-relation then one of them exists at one time and the other exists *at a later time*. This is true quite independently of what objects we say are B-related to one another. Thus, if one ersatz time presently exists and another is *later than* that ersatz time, then this other ersatz time does not presently exist.

With that thought in mind, we face a choice. First, we could endorse the view that not all ersatz times ‘presently exist’. Some ersatz times are *genuinely* earlier than others and so not all of them can be present. If we take this option then we deny presentism by allowing that there are objects that exist in time that do not exist at the present.

Second, we could extend what counts as ‘presently existing’. We could say that *all* ersatz times presently exist, despite the fact that some are *genuinely* earlier than and later than others. To extend ‘present existence’ to include *all* of the ersatz-times that are earlier than/after than one another, requires us to extend ‘present existence’ to encompass at least 14 billion years. If we take this second option then we also deny presentism, in this case because the presentist does not think that ‘present existence’ extends to durations of (e.g.) 14 billion years. (Indeed, *no-one* should think that ‘present existence’ extends to 14 billion years.) Either way, however, we deny presentism and we are forced to do so simply by the nature of genuine B-relations.

The natural reply to this argument moves us on to the second reading of (1) that Rasmussen might offer: when we talk of the ‘earlier than’ and ‘later than’ relations, we do not mean to talk about *genuine* B-relations. Rather, in the same way that we’re talking about abstract *times* in temporal ersatzism, so we are talking about abstract, or ersatz, B-relations as well. Because of this ersatz B-relation, it is possible for abstract times to be ersatz-earlier and ersatz-later than one another. This, in turn (let us suppose) makes true our talk about some events being *genuinely* earlier than (and later than) others.

This is all well and good, but an ersatz B-relation is not a B-relation; it is a representation of a B-relation. And, in that case, even if we can reduce A-properties to ersatz B-relations, this is not to deny the A-theory. The central tenet of the A-theory, (A), is that A-properties are not reducible to B-relations. Since ersatz B-relations are not identical to B-relations, to reduce A-properties to ersatz B-relations is not to deny the principle enshrined in (A) and, hence, is not to deny the central tenet of the A-theory.

One might be inclined to reply on Rasmussen’s behalf, here, that we do still have a reduction of the A-properties to something a lot *like* B-relations – ersatz B-relations are pretty similar to B-relations, after all – and in that case this is still perilously close to denying the A-theory.

But there are two good reasons to resist this line. First, the response is not strictly relevant. The claim made by Markosian (2010) and endorsed by Rasmussen is that (A) is essential to the A-theory. Rasmussen thinks that (A) can be denied by presentists. On the ersatz view of the B-relations, the presentist does not reject (A) because ersatz B-relations *are not* B-relations; thus, the ersatz presentist does not reject the A-theory.

Second, it’s not at all clear how similar *ersatz* B-relations really are to B-relations. Strictly and literally, some *x* is ‘an ersatz *y*’ if and only if *x* is representation of *y*. This is just what the term ‘ersatz’ means. But a representation of a relation need not resemble it very closely for representations

need not resemble what they represent. Sentences, for instance, are sometimes used to represent the world, but no one takes seriously the idea that the sentence ‘the dog ate my homework’ closely resembles the dog’s eating my homework. It is therefore far from clear that there is any mileage in the claim that the B-relations closely resemble the ersatz B-relations.

#### 4. *Presentism without the A-theory*

However, there *is* a way to be a presentist without being an A-theorist. There is a condition that A-theories must satisfy, that Rasmussen does not make explicit – though it is implied. Like Rasmussen, I draw this condition from Markosian’s (2010) account of what it is for a view to be an A-theory, where the point *is* made explicit. In order for a view to be A-theoretic, it must posit *A-properties*. A view that does not posit A-properties *at all* is not an A-theoretic view. Presentism, I claim, need not be a version of the A-theory. Presentism need not posit a property of presence (and since it denies the existence of past and future has no need of the corresponding properties).

To see how this argument works, we need to begin by thinking about existence. Existence, on some views, is not a property. I concede of course that on other views existence *is* a property, but these other views need not worry us (here, at least). Like Rasmussen (2012: 273) I’m trying to do nothing more than show that there is a consistent way of being a presentist without also being an A-theorist, and for that argument to succeed I (like Rasmussen (2012: 275)) don’t need to persuade you that the view introduced here is actually true; I merely need to show that we have ‘no clear reason’ to not accept it.<sup>2</sup>

The kind of view of existence that I have in mind is one according to which existence and being are treated as the one and the same. The view is broadly Quinean and, crucially for my purposes, does *not* treat existence as a property. Van Inwagen (2008: 37) describes the view in the following way:

Existence or being is what is expressed by phrases like ‘there is’, ‘there are’, and ‘something is’. Similarly, non-existence or non-being is what is expressed by phrases like ‘there is no’, ‘there are no’, and ‘nothing is’. Thus ‘Universals exist’ means neither more nor less than ‘There are universals’, and the same goes for the pairs ‘Carnivorous cows do not exist’/‘Nothing is both carnivorous and a cow’ and ‘The planet Venus exists’/‘Something is the planet Venus’.<sup>3</sup>

2 Cf Rasmussen 2012: 275.

3 Van Inwagen (2008: 38) confirms that this view of existence is consistent with existence not being a property.

According to the view that existence is not a property, it is nonetheless true of any  $x$  that  $\langle x$  exists $\rangle$ . We do not need to commit to the property of *existing* for  $\langle x$  exists $\rangle$  to be true; any  $x$  will serve to make true this proposition.

We can, I claim, think of presentism in a similar fashion. The view of presentism that I offer, is this: for any  $x$ ,  $x$  makes it true that  $\langle x$  is present $\rangle$ . There is nothing more than  $x$  required for  $\langle x$  is present $\rangle$  to be true. We do not require  $x$  to instantiate a property of presence in order for  $x$  to make it true that  $\langle x$  is present $\rangle$  any more than we require  $x$  to instantiate a property of existence in order for  $x$  to make it true that  $\langle x$  exists $\rangle$ . Just as any  $x$  makes true  $\langle x$  exists $\rangle$  so too any  $x$  makes true  $\langle x$  is present $\rangle$ . For ease of reference, I will proceed to call this view ‘Existence Presentism’ (EP) – so called because it commits us to a view of presence similar to that sometimes taken of existence.

## 5. Clarifications

Although I am not arguing *for* (EP) in this article, I’m merely seeking to demonstrate its coherence, it is nonetheless important to clear up a couple of points in order to demonstrate that it *is* coherent and that it *really isn’t* a version of the A-theory. In lieu of this, I’ll look to make three points: first, the view is distinctively presentist and is not compatible with eternalism (roughly, the view that all times exist). Second, there is no compelling problem introduced by talk of truthmaker theory in the definition of (EP). Third, given a different reading of what the A-theory *is*, (EP) is still not a version of the A-theory.

### 5.1 Distinctively presentist

(EP) is not compatible with eternalism. Like Rasmussen (2012:271), in formulating Existence Presentism I’ll assume that the universal quantifier is unrestricted. (EP) then amounts to the view that for *any*  $x$ ,  $x$  makes it true that  $\langle x$  is present $\rangle$ . Such a view is not trivial. No eternalist can endorse it, because the eternalist believes that there exist (provided the quantifier is unrestricted) dinosaurs; if dinosaurs exist, then according to (EP), the dinosaurs make it true that  $\langle$ dinosaurs are present $\rangle$ . But that’s false. Dinosaurs aren’t present. (Of course, there’s a nearby proposition that is true:  $\langle$ Dinosaurs are present in the year 65m BC $\rangle$  – or similar. But that proposition is not identical to  $\langle$ dinosaurs are present $\rangle$ .) And so we must say that (EP) is not compatible with eternalism.

It is also worth noting that (EP) entails the truth of ‘everything is present’. This is a straightforward consequence of the view: for all  $x$ ,  $x$  makes it true that  $\langle x$  is present $\rangle$ . As a consequence, (EP) is (obviously) presentist. Since (EP) is a form of presentism, is demonstrably distinct from eternalism and not an A-theoretic view, this gives us good reason to think that we can be presentists without also being A-theorists.



### 5.2 Truthmaker theory

One might worry that (EP) is threatened by talk of ‘making-true’ because presentism faces a well-known truthmaker *objection*. Briefly: there are true propositions about the past, true propositions require existing truthmakers, and there are no non-present objects; it is therefore unclear how the presentist can preserve the truth of true propositions about the past. Since it is most undesirable to deny that there are truths about the past, the presentist faces a worry. In this article, of course, we are not concerned with whether it is desirable to think that there are truths about the past; we’re merely concerned with whether or not it’s *possible* to be a presentist without being an A-theorist, in order to establish whether or not (EP) is a variety of A-theory.

But, my (imagined) opponent may have a more controversial concern in mind. The concern might be that, absent truths about the past or future, a world is *not* presentist; it makes no sense to think that a world is presentist if there are no tensed truths about at least one of past and future. Presentism is, after all, a theory of time and there may be genuine concerns that a world at which there are no tensed truths about the past or future is not one at which time is real.<sup>4</sup>

There are presentist replies to the truthmaker problem. Some of the replies seek to provide presently existing truthmakers, whilst others deny that truths about the past and future require truthmakers.<sup>5</sup> But whatever one’s preference on this score, there are options available. As a consequence, merely that (EP) makes recourse to talk of ‘making true’ does not constitute a concern. So, (EP) is a presentist theory but – since it does not posit A-properties – it is not an A-theoretic view.

### 5.3 Stating the A-theory

There is a potential worry with the claim that (EP) is not a version of the A-theory. A different statement of the A-theory may be available. The A-theory could be understood as the view that there are A-facts (the fact that *e* is present, for instance) and that these A-facts are not reducible to B-facts (e.g. the fact that *e* is simultaneous with some token representation of *e*). Suppose, then, that we thought that there exist A-facts. Whilst we are committed to A-facts, it’s not clear why these cannot be reduced to *existence* facts.<sup>6</sup> The existence presentist posits *existence* facts (goes the claim) so we

4 For discussions of timeless worlds, see Effingham and Melia 2007.

5 Tallant (2009) offers a defence of both strategies. If one worried that providing truthmakers *required* us to introduce something worryingly akin to A-properties (e.g. Bigelow’s (1996) Lucretianism according to which the world instantiating the property *having* contained dinosaurs, makes it true that <there were dinosaurs>), one should, for current purposes, deny that true propositions about the past and future have truthmakers. See, *inter alia*, Merricks (2007: chapter 6) for a further defence of this view.

6 Though at least one A-theorist *does* claim that the A-properties are fundamental – Zimmerman (2008: 212).



can use these to reductively analyse the A-facts. As long as A-facts aren't reduced to B-facts, we still have an A-theory. (EP) may be a viable formulation of presentism, but it remains a version of the A-theory.<sup>7</sup>

The first question is whether or not we *should* allow this new definition of the A-theory. Sadly, there is no *firm* agreement in the wider literature as to how to state the A-theory. Some explicitly state the view in terms of properties: Markosian (2010), Prosser (2000: 494), Smart (2008: 230) and Zimmerman (2008: 212). Others think that a view is A-theoretic if it includes *either* A-properties *or* tensed facts: Oaklander (2004: 25). This survey is far from exhaustive and does nothing to show that we *should* define the A-theory in terms of properties only.

Nonetheless, I think that we can block the objection. Allow that the A-theory is to be defined as follows: there are either A-facts or A-properties. It is still possible to be a presentist without being an A-theorist: we need simply deny the existence of facts.<sup>8</sup> The objection made above argues that we can posit non-fundamental A-facts that are to be reductively analysed in terms of existence facts. If there are no facts *at all* then there *are* no existence facts. In that case, the suggested reduction of A-facts to existence facts cannot go through for there are simply *no facts*. This is not an unreasonable view. There are metaphysical systems that do not posit facts – versions of substance theory, bundle theory, and so on – and so, at least as far as I can tell, it is possible to be a presentist without being an A-theorist, even on his revised reading of what it is to endorse an A-theory.<sup>9</sup>

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7 I'm very grateful to a referee for raising this objection.

8 For reasons that one might be tempted to do so, see Lowe 1998: chapter 11.

9 I'm very grateful to David Ingram and an anonymous referee for this journal for comments on a previous draft.

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## *Mixed strategies, uncountable times, and Pascal’s Wager: a reply to Robertson*

KENNY EASWARAN AND BRADLEY MONTON

1. The proponent of Pascal’s Wager argues that one has pragmatic reason to believe in God, since that course of action has infinite expected utility. The mixed strategy objection holds that one could just as well follow the course of action of rolling a  $n$ -sided die, for arbitrarily large (but finite)  $n$ , and only believing in God if side #1 comes up – that course of action also has infinite expected utility. Bradley Monton (2011) has argued that mixed strategies can’t evade Pascal’s Wager: if one decides to follow the mixed strategy course of action, and one rolls the die and side #1 does not come up, one no longer has infinite expected utility from following that course of action, so it is rational for one to follow that mixed strategy course of action again. One can see where this process will end up, if one keeps engaging in it, so it’s pragmatically rational to not keep sitting there and rolling the die, but instead to embrace the result that one fully expects to get, and choose to believe in God.

Steven Robertson (2012) has replied that some mixed strategies that meet Monton’s requirements for rational agents ‘do not lead inevitably to the agent believing in God, and thus avoid Monton’s result.’ We will explain that Robertson misses a crucial aspect of Monton’s argument, and hence his argument does nothing to show that some mixed strategies can evade Pascal’s Wager. We will also explain how this exchange sheds some light on the role of mixed strategies in decision theory.

2. Robertson gives three mildly complicated mixed strategies to illustrate his point, but one simple mixed strategy will do. Consider the mixed strategy of