

Presentism and Truth-Making

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Presentism and Truth-making

Jonathan Tallant

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Abstract Here, I defend the view that there is no sensible way to pin a truth-maker objection on presentism. First, I suggest that if we adopt truth-maker maximalism then the presentist can requisition appropriate ontological resources with impunity. Second, if we deny maximalism, then the presentist can sensibly restrict the truth-maker principle in order to avoid the demand for truth-makers for talk about the non-present.

1 Presentism

I want to ask two questions at the outset: what *is* presentism and why should we believe it? Presentism is the view that only the present exists, or, to offer the account given recently, presentism is the view that everything that exists, exists now (Crisp 2004, p. 18). That there exists an adequate formulation of presentism is not uncontroversial (e.g. Meyer 2005, though see Sider 2006), but I'm going to suppose for the purposes of this paper that an adequate definition *is* available.

One of the reasons most commonly cited by presentists to believe presentism is that it is the most intuitive view of time (e.g. Bigelow 1996, p. 36). Whether or not this is in fact true isn't something I'm going to explore here. Let's grant the presentist that theirs is the most intuitive view and that the intuitive pull of the view is sufficient to motivate it.

What's interesting, though, is that the slogan, 'everything that exists, exists now', really doesn't suffice to fully capture those intuitions. What the slogan leaves out, but the presentist must defend in order to preserve our intuitions about time, is that

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although only the present exists, it is true that various entities *have* existed, and that various entities *will* exist. Thus, there *were* dinosaurs and there *will be* Mars outposts. If the presentist denies these claims, then they surely deny our intuitions about time, and if those intuitions about time provide the motivation for presentism, then presentism would be unmotivated.

But this provides the presentist with a problem. We suppose that it is true that ‘there were dinosaurs’ and that ‘there will be outposts on Mars’ (say); but we don’t want to say that the past and future exist. Reconciling the presentist’s ontological commitment to *only* the present with their claim that there are truths about the past and future is problematic because, intuitively, in order for some contingent sentence about the world to be true, there needs to be some feature of the world that *makes* it true.

This intuition, that sentences about the world are made true by some feature of the world, is often referred to as the truth-maker intuition and gets developed into a theoretic construct. Allow that $\langle p \rangle$ stands for, ‘the proposition p ’. The truth-maker *theory* then states:

TM: $\langle p \rangle$ is true because p .¹

TM is thus supposed to be a simple extension of our intuitions about how propositions get made true.

So we’ve identified three intuitions: the intuition that everything that exists, exists now; the intuition that there are truths about the past and future; and the intuition that that a proposition about some entity or other is true *because* of that entity. Since past and future entities don’t exist, there’s nothing for (e.g.) past tensed propositions to be true ‘because of’. According to TM, then, tensed propositions about the past and future *aren’t* true.

As Armstrong (2004), p. 146 puts it:

What truthmaker can be provided for the truth \langle Caesar existed \rangle ? The obvious truthmaker, at least, is Caesar himself. But to allow Caesar as a truthmaker seems to allow reality to the past, contrary to the [presentist] hypothesis.

2 Maximalism and Presentism

I’m interested in the debate between those who defend the view that *every* truth has a truth-maker (‘Maximalism’, hereafter) and those who deny that this is the case. My reasons for being interested in this debate here are obvious: if it’s not the case that every truth requires a truth-maker then the presentist might reasonably deny that we need truth-makers for truths about the past and future. And, if Maximalism turns out to be the best way to conceive of truth-making, then (or so I’ll argue) presentism really isn’t faced with a problem at all for we can invoke ungrounded tensed facts, and we may do so with impunity.

¹ C.f. Pereyra (2005), pp. 20–1.

Maximalism is, as already mentioned, the view that *every* truth has a truth-maker. One of the problems typically advanced for Maximalism is the problem of negative existential truths: true propositions that state, for some x , ' x does not exist'. What *makes* that true?

Take, as our example, the proposition <there are no arctic penguins>. What makes true this proposition? It can't be Antarctic penguins. *Those* penguins don't make it true that there are no penguins at the arctic. Nor does the arctic itself make it true that there are no penguins at the arctic. The most obvious candidates to be truth-makers for such propositions are negative facts, something like the fact that 'there are no arctic penguins'. This fact, if real, would reside in the world, much like all of our other, positive, facts.

The problem, of course, is that such facts are *deeply* suspicious:

There is implanted in the human breast an almost unquenchable desire to find some way of avoiding the admission that negative facts are as ultimate as those that are positive (Russell 1989, p. 287).

This then looks to leave us with a choice: embrace 'suspicious' facts, or claim that there are a certain class of truths for which we need no truth-makers. So let's be good Maximalists. Let's say that for every truth there really is a truth-maker and that if we have to accept that there are these strange negative or totality facts, then we'll do so.

This then brings us on to a strategy that the presentist might employ when it comes to talking about the past and future. We might say that there are *ungrounded* tensed facts residing at the present moment; facts such as 'there were dinosaurs' and, 'there will be outposts on Mars'.² That looks like it will solve the truth-maker objection to presentism, so mightn't the presentist adopt the view that there are ungrounded tensed facts? Certainly, ungrounded tensed facts are suspicious, but so are the negative facts to which the Maximalist is already committed.

The obvious way to oppose presentism is to say more clearly what this 'suspiciousness' amounts to, and argue that negative facts *aren't really* suspicious. We have a criterion of suspiciousness, one due to Sider, and it will serve us here. (Sider's discussion concerns what he calls hypothetical and categorical properties and I want to talk about facts, here, so the attack on tensed facts that I'll make will have to be slightly different from the attack that Sider himself pens. Call this the argument from Sider*.)

Sider opens by consideration of dispositions. It would be illegitimate, ontologically, for us to claim that the disposition of a glass to break (say) is ungrounded. Instead, according to Sider, we ought to say that the disposition of the glass to break is grounded in the properties of the glass and the laws of nature. That would be ok. But dispositions that aren't grounded in *anything* are ontologically circumspect: to be plain, ontologies that invoke such dispositions are cheating (2001), p. 41.

² Notice, this is a distinct strategy from claiming that the world is such that it has tensed properties, properties such as '*having been* thus and so'. Such properties are defended by Bigelow (1996); though see Merricks (2007), p. 137 for criticism.

In analysing what goes wrong in cheating ontologies, Sider has the following to say:

‘What seems common to all the cheats is that irreducibly *hypothetical* properties are postulated, whereas a proper ontology should invoke only *categorical*, or occurrent, properties and relations. Categorical properties involve what objects are actually like, whereas hypothetical properties ‘point beyond’ their instances. The presentist’s primitive tensed properties (or operators, or whatever) would be hypothetical’ (2001, p. 41).

So, the thought would be, the maximalists, with their negative facts, aren’t cheating and, thus, the maximalists have good reason to object to presentism.

3 Negatives and Tenses are of a Kind

The difficulty with this line of thought is that it looks as if negative facts and tensed facts might well *both* be hypothetical given Sider’s characterisation. Assume, to begin with, that Sider is right in his characterisation of the hypothetical and categorical. To repeat: ‘Categorical properties involve what objects are actually like, whereas hypothetical properties ‘point beyond’ their instances’ (Sider 2001, p. 41). For instance, ‘redness’ is a categorical property. It’s a property that contributes to how the object actually is: namely, red. But, for any red object (or an object of any colour, in fact), the property ‘possibly green’ does not make any contribution to how the object actually is. Instead, such a property would make a contribution to how the object *could* have been.

The tensed facts under discussion here *appear*, of course, to be hypothetical. As Sider (2001, p. 41) notes: ‘Whether the world has the property *previously containing dinosaurs* is not a matter of what the world itself is like.’ Indeed not. Past tensed properties, or facts, make a contribution not to how the world *is*, but to how it *was*. Thus, tensed facts are hypothetical.

Back to Maximalism. The Maximalist, in order to make true negative existential claims, needed to make recourse to a totality fact or a fact such that ‘nothing exists other than the world’. How we parse this is irrelevant.³ What is important is that the fact required by the Maximalist is *negative*: it is not a fact about how the world is, it is a fact about how the world *is not* and, as such, it cannot sensibly be said to be grounded in how the world is.

Negative facts, then, are similarly hypothetical. To see this, consider, once more, our example of a negative fact: there are no arctic penguins. In order for the proposition to be true, the negative fact of there being no arctic penguins must exist (or some similarly negative totality fact). Such a fact would make no difference to how the world actually *is*; rather, a fact about how the world *is not*, will make a difference to how the world actually is *not*: namely, such as to *not* include Arctic penguins. If categorical facts are those that make a difference to how the world *is*,

³ So although Armstrong (2004, p. 70) prefers to talk in terms of a ‘totality fact’, this is undeniably a negative fact: this is all that exists, there’s *nothing more*. Cf. Molnar (2000, p. 76).

then negative facts cannot be categorical facts. If negative facts are hypothetical then the maximalist is already committed to hypothetical facts.⁴ Ungrounded tensed facts would be perfectly respectable for the maximalist.

The natural thought, then, is that in order to re-raise a problem for the presentist, the Maximalist must find some other way of categorising negative facts as categorical and tensed facts as hypothetical. Perhaps we can do that. For instance, Beall treats negative facts as ‘of a kind’ with less controversial, positive, facts. The only difference between positive and negative facts consists in their ‘polarity’: these polarities are entirely *unmysterious* (Beall 2000, p. 266), and are analogous to the polarities we find in physics—such as spin, charm and so on (*op cit*).

Yet claiming that such facts are ‘of a kind’ with positive facts is no good here. We have a classificatory scheme in place that classifies negative facts as cheating—that is, hypothetical—because they ‘point beyond’, not because they are ‘mysterious’. What the proponent of negative facts needs, then, is some principled way to resist that classification.

Clearly, there *is* a way of resisting this move. We objected that negative facts make no difference to how the world *actually is*. In making that objection we may be guilty of having read the ‘is’ as having ‘positive’ existential force.⁵ That is, we were *only* considering positive facts as making a difference to how the world *is*: not facts that make a difference to how the world *is not*. But without begging the question against the proponent of negative facts it would be hard to see how that can be appropriate. For, if we ask the question ‘what *is* there?’ and hear that as a question asking ‘what non-negative things are there?’, then we prejudice ourselves against the proponent of negative facts.

If, on the other hand, we allow that the ‘is’ is neutral as to the ‘polarity’ of existence, then negative facts *do* make a difference to the nature of the world. They make it such that the world includes, for instance, *no-arctic-penguins*. That’s a difference-making fact, just not a difference-maker that impacts on how things *are*. Thus, what went wrong is that we heard the criteria for a fact being hypothetical as one sensitive only to facts with positive polarity. Once we recognise this as a question begging way to hear the question ‘what is there?’ we recognise that negative facts are perfectly acceptable. The state of the dialectic, if that’s right, is that negative facts are categorical, and acceptable; tensed facts are hypothetical and unacceptable.

If this argument will work for the proponent of negative facts, though, then a similar one ought to work for the presentist, thus diffusing the objection to the presentist once more. Suppose we grant that the inclusion of tensed facts into our ontology makes no difference to how the world *actually is now*. According to the presentist, present-tensed facts aren’t *supposed* to make a difference to how things *are*; instead, as noted above, they make a difference to how things *have been*. So, the thought goes, in much the same way that negative facts are categorical because

⁴ I assume that non-categorical facts *are* hypothetical facts. Certainly, no further category is postulated by Sider. Likewise, Crisp (2007) treats non-categorical as hypothetical.

⁵ At least, someone looking to defend negative facts in light of the classificatory scheme may argue that we are.

they contribute to a positive/negative neutral way that the world actually 'is', tensed facts may also be regarded categorical because they contribute to a 'tense-neutral' way that the world is: the way that the world has been, is, or will be.⁶ So, just as negative facts make a difference to the world by making it such that it *does not* include arctic penguins, past-tensed facts make a difference to the world by making it such that it *has* included Caesar crossing the Rubicon.

For this argument to be persuasive we need only recognise that, just as the 'is' in 'actually is' can be heard as signifying only positive polarity, it can also be heard as present-tensed. Thus, if we make a case that negative facts make a difference to how things *are not*, and allow that this is the sort of thing that it's legitimate for facts to do, then there isn't an obvious, principled reason to think that tensed facts, that make a difference to how things *were*, as opposed to how things *are now*, should be ruled illegitimate. The net result of this is that there doesn't seem to be a principled way for the Maximalist to force an objection to tensed facts.⁷ We either allow that negative facts are hypothetical, and permit negative facts, or we rule them categorical, in which case tensed facts may similarly be regarded as categorical.

4 Or restrict?

But the presentist has another option available to them. Not *all* participants in this debate argue in favour of Maximalism. Some think that there are specific domains for which we need provide no truth-maker; typically, in the case of negative existentials.⁸ Following their lead, the presentist might think that talk about the past and the future is one such domain.

Two problems then arise for the presentist. First, how do we justify, even in principle, a restriction to Maximalism? Second, why think that the *presentist* is entitled to make such a restriction to benefit their position? For instance, we might think that we have no need of truth-makers for negative existentials: but that wouldn't establish, of itself, that the presentist need not provide us with any truth-makers for talk about the past and future. In what remains of this section I'll discuss the plausibility of restricting truth-maker *at all* before turning my attention to restricting truth-maker such that we need no truth-makers for talk about the past and future, in Sect. 5.

Dodd (2007) argues that if the truth-maker theorist gives up on Maximalism then their view loses motivation. We might, for instance, replace TM (above) with TM*.

⁶ In other words, the 'is' is to be understood as tensed-disjunctive.

⁷ The recalcitrant opponent might object that negative facts *do* make a difference to what there is, unrestrictedly. That is, unrestrictedly, there are *not-penguins* (though I'm assuming that we're still opposed, as Beall is, to absences). But the presentist, on the other hand, does *not* claim that, unrestrictedly, there *are* dinosaurs. So, there is a difference to be had between negative and past-tensed facts. In reply, the presentist need merely note that, unrestrictedly, there *are* such things as *having been* dinosaurs. Sure, such things are *really* strange. But they're still categorical on the grounds that they make a difference to how things are, unrestrictedly.

⁸ For instance, Lewis (1992, p. 216).

TM* Necessarily, if $\langle p \rangle$ is an *atomic* truth, then there exists at least one entity α such that α necessitates $\langle p \rangle$'s truth Dodd (2007, p. 393).

But, Dodd thinks, *any* such restriction to the truth-maker principle is *ad hoc* because the motivation for accepting the truth-maker thesis depends upon the intuition that *truth* depends upon reality, not that *some* truths depend upon reality.

Dodd looks to prosecute the case against the restriction of truth-maker by arguing that the intuition supporting truth-maker is general, and would not survive transplant to a restricted theory of truth-making. To persuade us of this Dodd offers us the following analysis of the motivation of truth-maker.

'The most plausible way of motivating truthmaker theory is to present it as offering the best explanation of a strong intuition of ours concerning truth. Put bluntly, the intuition in question is that *truth depends upon reality*' (2007, p. 393).

The canonical expression of this intuition is:

(GT) $\langle p \rangle$ is true because p .

Dodd also claims that:

'it is equally undeniable that such grounding is asymmetrical. Whilst we accept (GT), we do not accept that reality is grounded in truth, that.

(GR) p because $\langle p \rangle$ is true' (2007, p. 393).

The explanation of this asymmetry and the intuition (GT) is best explained by truth-maker. Again, to quote Dodd,

'The filling in between ' $\langle p \rangle$ ' and ' p ' in GT—is true because—turns out to be 'is made true by' in disguise. (2007, p. 393).

The asymmetry is established by there being no sense in which the truth of propositions 'makes real' any corresponding entity and truth-maker explains the correctness of (GT) as well; and, 'the correctness of (GT) is best explained by the fact that a true proposition has an ontological ground' (2007, p. 393).

In light of this, if we try to restrict Maximalism then we run into trouble. Truth-maker is, 'one particular way of trying to explain the intuition that what is true is determined by how things are, but not vice versa.' (2007, p. 394). If this asymmetry can only be explained by the truth-maker theory, and truth-maker fails in some cases, then the intuition that *truth-in-general* requires ground is not explained by truth-maker, and so truth-maker is unmotivated.

I think we can motivate a restriction, contra Dodd's arguments. Suppose, to begin with, that we note the intuition that truth has ground. (Dodd agrees that we have this intuition). We note, following Dodd (2007, p. 384), that the intuition seems to amount to, in semi-formal terms, the thought that: ' α is the ontological ground of the true proposition p just in case α is a worldly entity that *necessitates* $\langle p \rangle$'s truth.'⁹

⁹ C.f. Armstrong (2004, pp. 5–7).

Based on this grounding intuition, we formulate the truth-maker *hypothesis*: all truths need ground.¹⁰ We then test our hypothesis. We notice, as we test our hypothesis, that it doesn't seem to work in all cases: for instance, in the case of negative existentials. However, we notice that it *does* seem to work in other cases. It's easy to find truth-makers, for example, for positive existentials. Lots of things *exist* and each of those existing entities seem to necessitate the truth of propositions about them. That seems to confirm that for any α , α is the ground of many a true proposition $\langle p \rangle$. The mistake would be to suppose that we ought to look for truth-makers *because* we have this truth-maker *theory*; instead, we ought to look to the *world*, see what exists, and determine whether those existents necessitate the truth of propositions about them. And, for all of the existents in the world, this *does* seem to be the case. To repeat: for any α , α is the ground of many a true proposition $\langle p \rangle$. So, why believe *restricted* truth-maker? Not, I suggest, because it explains the intuition that truth is grounded, as Dodd would have it, but because it seems true.¹¹

What would be beneficial, then, is some explanation of how we find ourselves with this faulty intuition. If some version of restricted truth-maker is correct, then the intuition that all truths need ground, noted by Dodd, is false, and presumably it must issue forth from some source or other.

One explanation of this is that it's a generalisation from familiar cases. That is, it's a generalisation from cases where truths (seemingly) obviously do have truth-makers (\langle I'm hungry \rangle , \langle the rose is red \rangle , \langle sugar as sweet \rangle etc.), to cases where truths *do not* have truth-makers (\langle there are no arctic penguins \rangle , \langle I have no more than 5 coins in my pocket \rangle etc.). The generalisation from homespun cases is, of course, faulty, if restricted truth-maker is right. Dialectically, that looks a feasible explanation.

5 Only Present Tensed Positive Existentials?

There remains the further question of how and why to restrict truth-maker such that the presentist need not provide us with truth-makers for talk about the past. After all, we might grant that we don't need truth-makers for talk about what there *isn't*, but still hear claims about the past as claims about what there *is*, in at least some sense.

Above, I suggested that the *wrong* way to think about truth-maker here would be as a universal claim about the nature of truth. Instead, the claim that all truths have truth-makers is a hypothesis to be tested. When we test it, we find that it fails in some cases and works in others. Thus, we ought to keep the hypothesis as a restricted claim about positive existentials. Likewise, if we look to the world, claims the presentist, we will find no existent entities to act as truth-makers for talk about what was. Thus, because there are no existent entities that 'truth-make' past-tensed propositions so there can be no demand for truth-makers for past-tensed propositions. Thus, talk

¹⁰ C.f. Armstrong (2004, p. 7). Dodd explores this option for restricting truth-maker, but rejects it on the grounds that it involves turning our backs on the intuition that all truth needs ground. Dodd (2007, fn 14).

¹¹ I'm happy to grant, here, that restricted truth-maker doesn't tell us anything very interesting about either the nature of truth or about how we might do metaphysics. But since I'm not a maximalist I'm surely committed to both of these claims already.

about the past and future should not be called upon to provide truth-makers. So, first up, the presentist can simply argue that this is just another instance where we've inferred from cases where truths do have truth-makers (present tensed, positive claims) to cases where we do not (claims about, e.g., the past).

Although I think such a claim is the right one for the presentist, it would be preferable to have some explanation of the intuitive pull of truth-maker when it comes to talk about the past if truth-maker doesn't apply to the past. Here is a tentative thought.

We remember various events in years gone by. For instance, we remember what it was like being in 1995. When we inhabited the year 1995, all of the truths *about* events in the relevant portion of 1995 had truth-makers. So if we recall 1995, and the present tensed truths that *were* about (the relevant part of) 1995, then we remember truths-about-1995 as truths requiring truth-makers. So, the (false) intuition might run, truths about 1995 need truth-makers because truths about 1995 *did* need truth-makers.

But, claims the presentist, our memory of 1995 tells us how the world *was*, not how the world *is* (unrestrictedly). Of course, denying that the world still is that way (that is, denying that 1995 is any part of existence and so denying that 1995—and any part thereof—is a truth-maker) is one of the central tenets of presentism.

Thus the presentist, who is trying to explain the lure of the faulty generalisation, need simply argue that we're inclined to think that current *past-tensed* talk about 1995 needs truth-makers, because present tensed talk about 1995 *did* need truth-makers. To the extent that our memory encourages us to think of 1995 as something that provides us with truth-makers for (all) sentences that are about 1995, our memory misleads us. (At least, it misleads us if then try to extrapolate from previous present-tense sentences as having needed truth-makers to present past-tense sentences needing truth-makers.) Thus, we have an *explanation* of the intuitive pull of truth-maker in the case of truths about the past.

In any case, and regardless of whether or not this provides an explanation of the lure of truth-maker for talk about the past, the presentist still has a cogent position. Rather than supposing each domain need provide us with truth-makers, we are now proceeding on the assumption that truth-maker is a theory to be tested in each domain. The presentist need simply object that the past and future are not domains in which we find existents that necessitate the truth of propositions. After all, neither past nor future exist.

6 Conclusion

Like many, I am drawn to both presentism and truth-maker, but I remain suspicious of both negative facts and ungrounded tensed facts. All that I hope to have shown here is that presentism doesn't seem to be any worse off than the truth-maker theory *itself*.¹²

¹² For reasons to think that presentism is *not* troubled unduly by the, weaker, supervenience thesis, see Kierland and Monton (2007).

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