Time for Presence?

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Abstract It is, I think, possible to generate a variation of McTaggart's (Mind 17:457–474, 1908) paradox that infects all extant versions of presentism. This is not to say that presentism is doomed to failure. There may be ways to modify presentism and I can't anticipate all such modifications, here. For the purposes of the paper I'll understand 'presentism' to be the view that for all x, x is present (cf. Crisp (2004: 18)). It seems only right that, at a conference devoted to McTaggart's work on time, we continue to pursue new ways in which his now infamous arguments remain relevant to us today.

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Introduction

It is, I think, possible to generate a variation of McTaggart's (1908) paradox that infects all extant versions of presentism. This is not to say that presentism is doomed to failure. There may be ways to modify presentism and I can't anticipate all such modifications, here. For the purposes of the paper I'll understand 'presentism' to be the view that for all x, x is present (cf. Crisp (2004: 18)). It seems only right that, at a conference devoted to McTaggart's work on time, we continue to pursue new ways in which his now infamous arguments remain relevant to us today.

I'll understand McTaggart's paradox as follows. In order for time to be real, entities in time must be first future, then present and then past. However, this leads to the conclusion that entities in time *will be* present, *are* present, and *have been*

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present. Or, to put it another way, every entity in time is future-present; presently-present and past-present. Since each of these temporal determinations is supposedly mutually exclusive, so there is a contradiction and time cannot be real.[1] The thought, traditionally, has been that by denying the existence of the past and future the presentist can avoid any hint of a contradiction by denying the existence of two of the three incompatible properties. I think that the question that will ultimately cause problems for the presentist is, 'of what duration is the present?'

The Present is a Point

Suppose the present is of no duration: that is, the present is *akin* to a point. That being the case (and since everything is present), everything has no duration: equivalently, nothing has any duration. So far as I can tell this is false. *I* have duration, even if nothing else does.

One obvious reply on the part of the presentist is that 'my duration' consists in my existing at many different times. In other words, *my* duration consists in my existing, my *having* existed and that I *will* exist. Typically the presentist will then posit abstracta in various relations (typically, ersatz B-theoretic relations) to one another in order to make true our claims about times other than the present (see Crisp (2007) and Bourne (2006)).[2] Thus, I am of duration iff I presently exist and if abstract objects make it true that I either have or will exist at temporally contiguous moments.

My concern about such manoeuvres is two-fold. First, I share a similar concern to that expressed in Merricks (2007: 147); that my claims about *my* duration ought to be about *me*, not how abstract entities *represent* my future and past self. Second, I worry that the ersatzer solution leaves an undesirable gap between what's true about the past, and how things really were.

The 'Aboutness' Objection

Merricks begins by noting that in order for true proposition to be made true, it isn't enough *merely* that the proposition be made true: rather, the proposition must be made true by thing it is about. Thus, in the case of necessarily true mathematical propositions, my left thumb will not suffice to make true the mathematical proposition, even though, clearly, whenever my thumb exists, so the mathematical proposition is true (Merricks 2007: 24–5). Rather, what is needed is some 'mathematical' truth-maker.

Merricks then has the following to say about presentism: 'reconciling presentism with Truthmaker and TSB by way of the ersatz B-series requires that truths about the past be appropriately about the ersatz B-series' (2007: 131–2). If this turned out to be false, it would be unclear as to why the ersatz B-series would constitute ground for talk about the past.

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[1] See Oaklander (2004: 51–62) for a thorough explication and defence of the paradox.

[2] I don't consider the presentism espoused by Bigelow (1991), for reasons due to Oaklander (2004: 71–76), or the version defended by Craig (2000) due to Oaklander (2004: 101–115).

Merricks thinks there's more to be said. Namely, that it seems clear that claims like '*that the Trojans were conquered* are not about a primitive relation holding between one maximal proposition and another.' (2007: 132) Instead, Merricks thinks that my talk about *the past* ought to be understood as about *the past*. He then crystallises the objection to the ersatz proposals saying that talk about 'the past' being made true by the ersatz times, 'seems to me as clear as an example of a claim's failing to be about something that allegedly necessitates it as we could want' (2007: 132–3). Merricks' claim seems reasonable. The presentist denies that the ersatz B-series *is* the past (since the presentist denies the existence of the past), but yet wants to say that the ersatz series can *make true* talk about the past.

These considerations can then be applied to the case of persistence: suppose that I persist from t_1 to t_2 (where t_2 is present). That is, suppose the proposition <I persisted from t_1 to t_2> is true. What makes that true ought to be my persisting from t_1 to t_2. But the ersatzer, who analyses temporal talk in terms of ersatz times, *cannot* have that proposition come out true in virtue of *my persisting*, but only in virtue of me (or some temporal part of me) standing in ersatz relations to ersatz *representations of me* (or some temporal part of me).[3] That *seems* the wrong result.

Since my talk is intended to be about my past self, not some representation therein, so it seems that talk about my duration had better not merely be about some representation of me.

The Past and What's True *about* the Past

Consider the following objection, due to Melia (2005: 69), that argues that totality states of affairs are ill suited to making true talk about lacks (e.g. a lack of unicorns)

> It is simply wrongheaded to think that there should be a truthmaker which corresponds to negative existential sentences. Intuitively, what makes a sentence such as 'There are no Fs' is a *lack* of *F*s. Armstrong tries to account for such truths by postulating states of affairs of totality. Besides the bizarre necessary connections that such states of affairs entail (how can something's mere existence necessarily prevent an object d from being *F*), and besides the implausible nature of the totality relation itself, it is just confused to think that we must account for a *lack* by postulating the *existence* of something else.

Part of this objection can, I think, be used against the ersatzer.

The existence of a mere representation of how things were seems not to *necessitate* that things really were that way. For instance, suppose that the ersatz times represent the world as having been occupied by dinosaurs. How, then, does the mere existence of that *representation* entail that the world *was* occupied by

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[3] We could reply, here, that similar arguments ought to repudiate any ersatz analyses—in the case of modality, for instance. Not so. Non-temporal ersatzers typically try and *reduce* some other notion to representations. Thus, the modal ersatzer tries to analyse the notion of possible worlds *in terms of* representations. Crucially, the presentist ersatzer *isn't* trying to do that. The presentist ersatzer doesn't try and *reduce* times to these representations, but claims that ersatz times can make true talk about things that *will be* just like the present moment. Thus, the modal ersatzer's modal talk *is* about possible worlds where possible worlds *are* representations, but the presentist ersatzer's talk *is* not about times other than the present (else they aren't a presentist) but *is* about representations of those times.

dinosaurs? To illustrate the case, imagine God making the world only five minutes ago, and making all of ersatz times then, too. In such a world it would be true, according to the ersatzer, that the world has existed for millennia, and that there were dinosaurs, despite the fact that the world actually came into existence only five minutes ago and there never have been any dinosaurs.

The mere fact that a state of affairs such as the one described is *conceivable*, points to the fact that ersatz times are ill suited to playing the role of ground for talk about the past. It is surely unacceptable for any x to be a truth-maker for our talk about the world, but for it to then be possible for the world to be different to the way that x entails that it was.[4]

The ersatzer might object that although the case I describe is possible, if God did create the world in the way described then it wouldn't be true that 'God created the world five minutes ago', since God created the ersatz B-series such that 'there were dinosaurs in 65 million BC' is true, not that 'God created the world five minutes ago', is true. So, because of the way that God created the ersatz B-series, it's not actually true to say that God created the world five minutes ago. The problem thus disappears.

But, obviously, such is the move of a weasel. The point of the objection is that what *really happened* can fail to coincide with what we *can truthfully say about what happened*. That, or so it seems to me, is an unavoidable and undesirable outcome of the ersatzer proposal.[5] Without a guarantee that ersatz times don't get it wrong, it's hard to see how we can sensibly hold an ersatzer presentism.[6]

Generating Duration

Finally, if it is true that the presentist *can* account for duration, then the following technical problem can be raised. In the case of a spatial region it is true to say of that region that, if the region is composed of points, then the subtraction of a point from that region does not alter the volume of the region (see Hawthorne and Arntzenius (2005: 146)). In the temporal case, if we subtract away a point from a persisting object, we shouldn't change the length of the duration of that object—on the assumption that the duration of the object is non-zero. This is just a trivial

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[4] The ersatzer might *insist* that the representations *can't* get it wrong, it's a brute fact that ersatz times reflect the way that the world really was. But, in the case, they surely owe us *some* explanation of how it is these presumably unchanging and *a causal* abstract objects succeed in accurately representing. Without some explanation of how it is that ersatz times reliably track how the world turns out, it seems utterly incredible that the ersatz times get the right result.

[5] Notice: there doesn't seem to be an analogous objection to B-theory. If (for the sake of illustration) we allow that God created the world, as it is, only five minutes ago, then all of our 'earlier than' relations terminate in a point five minutes ago. There *are* no times before that, so there can be no difference between what's true about the past and how the past really was. The B-theorist removes the possibility of the problem by having the truth-maker for talk about the past, and the past itself, being the one and the same thing. Since the presentist denies that the past exists, they cannot avail themselves of the same move.

[6] If the presentist takes a leaf out of their modal counterparts' book, they might claim that ersatz times are *in fact* times and so remove the gap between representation and existence. The difficulty with this claim is two-fold: first, it would violate the presentists claim that 'only the present exists'; second, it seems to be false. It's surely an analytic claim that a time can be occupied by a concrete object. Since no ersatz time can be occupied by a concrete object, no ersatz time can be a genuine time.

consequence of temporal duration consisting of points. However, if only the present (point) existed, the subtraction of the point-present moment *would* radically alter the duration of any given entity in virtue of it constituting the destruction of *everything*. Thus, simple consideration of the nature of duration seems to rule out the possibility of a durationless present.

A natural reply to this line would be that the subtraction of a point (or any other sub-region of volume zero) from a given region of space does not change the volume of the region only on the assumption that that volume itself is non-zero. This trivial fact of measure theory does not go as far as establish that the "volume" of the present must be non-zero. So, because the 'temporal volume' (duration) of the present is *not* non-zero, so the argument can't get purchase here.[7]

So far as I can tell, the reply misses the force of the objection. The analogue of spatial volume is duration. Duration, e.g. *my* duration, must be non-zero (as we saw above). However, by destroying some zero-duration component of that non-zero duration (namely, the durationless present) we contrive to destroy *me* and if I am destroyed then it makes no sense to say that *I* can have a non-zero duration. In other words, we destroy something of non-zero duration (me) by destroying something with zero-duration, the present point that includes me. Thus, by destroying something of zero-duration, the present, we destroy something of non-zero duration, me.

An alternative response would be to say that the presentist should deny the starting assumption that a particular temporal duration consists of various points. Presentists do (and must) think of duration in a different way than non-presentists do. Duration for the presentist simply amounts to my having once existed and now existing or my now existing and later existing in the future. Presumably a presentist like everyone else can apply some measure to my duration; the presentist can say that I existed five minutes ago for instance. But the presentist isn't going to understand this measure involving a temporal region that consists of various points, that is, distinct times.[8] My concern with such a reply is that it would seemingly face the following objection.

The duration of objects must consist, at least in some part, of their existing at the present. (Seemingly, at some point in its existence an object will always contrive to be present (or so is *natural* to assume.)) Now the present, recall, is of zero duration; the non-zero element of the objects duration is then 'added' in *some* sense by the ersatz times (or what have you).

The objection remains, then, that by removing the *present* point from that otherwise non-zero duration (and where the non-zero element of the duration consists in part in what has been and what will be the case, and part in what exists at the present) we destroy the persisting thing. By destroying the persisting thing we destroy that which purportedly has non-zero duration. Thus, by removing a zero-durational point, we destroy something of non-zero duration.

The presentist, then, can (and should) agree that duration doesn't *just* consist in various points, but retains the problem whereby the non-zero duration of a persisting object is destroyed by the removal of a zero-durational point, because in the destruction of the zero-duration point, we destroy the object itself.

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[7] I'm indebted to an anonymous referee for making this point.

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Of course, there may be moves that the presentists can avail themselves of. Perhaps the presentist *can* somehow make use of the suggestion that duration consists in *once having existed* and being such that they *will exist*. In which case, the demand upon the presentist is surely, 'tell me more'.

The B-theoretic Present

So, the present is extended. The present might then: (i) be of minimal duration, such that there is no duration of time that is smaller than the present; (ii) be extended in some way, such that the present is composed, of either continuum many points; some minimal units of duration or 'gunky' parts.[9] Which of these is true doesn't matter to me too much, here, since I think the same argument can be made against all positions. What I aim to establish in here is that some portion of the present will be earlier than some other portion.

Allow, first, that the present is such that it is made up of smaller durations than just the present — but that nonetheless the sum of these durations constitutes the present. We must then ask how these minimal durations are related to one another. Since the duration of the present is greater than the duration of the minima, so the minima must be temporally related to one another in order to generate a duration greater in than any of the individual, minimal durations.

Thus, it seems right to say that each of these small durations is 'earlier than' and 'later than' some other duration, with the obvious exception of the first and last durations which will be only earlier than other instants and only later than other minima, respectively.

Similar arguments can be run if the present itself is of minimal duration. Allow that the present is of minimal duration (or *is* minimal duration). It follows that some portion of the present duration will have to be earlier than some other portion of the present, else the present will not constitute a duration. To see this, consider the following analogy. Imagine a minimally extended spatial region. If we were forced to deny that any non-zero distance relation related any two portions of that region, then we would have a *point*, not a region. Points, after all, are the sorts of entity that lack extension and do not stand in any non-zero distance relations to themselves. Regions, on the other hand, not being points, are such that portions of them stand in non-zero distance relations to other portions. This is true even if these portions do not qualify as proper parts.

Likewise, then, if we have a temporal *duration* (albeit a minimal unit of duration) it *must* be the case that some portion of that duration is later than some other portion. If this is not so, then it is not clear that we actually have a duration—we would merely have a temporal point of no duration.

So far, then, I take it that we've established that there are good reasons for thinking that portions of the present are earlier than and later than other portions of the present. As it stands, though, I'm not sure how much of a problem that is. One

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[9] Where a part is 'gunky' if it has proper parts and all further proper parts themselves have proper parts. I take it that the options presented are exhaustive and map onto the gunky/pointy/span options available in contemporary mereology. See McDaniel (2007) for discussion.

might suppose that the present, being such as it is, cannot be earlier than and later than itself. Since these various portions of the present are all present (since for every x, x is present) that would leave the present being earlier and later than itself.

But there's a common objection to an account of properties-as-Universals that such Universals would require that, for instance, 'blueness is 15 miles from itself' in virtue of being multiply instantiated. The standard reply, here, is simply to insist that our intuition that this is obviously false is an intuition borne of consideration of concrete particulars and, thus, should not be applied to cases involving Universals.

Similarly, then, one can partially alleviate the concern in the temporal case by treating 'is present' as a predicate made true by multiple instantiations of presentness: one instantiation per portion of duration. Each instance of the universal 'presentness' is then earlier or later than some other instance of the universal and our natural language predicate 'is present' applies, in the same way that other Armstrongian predicates apply to groups of low-level universals, in virtue of their constituting a class of 'family resemblance'. We can then circumvent the worry that persisting continents would still be earlier and later than *themselves* in virtue of their occupying the extended present by treating continents as having different temporal parts that coincide with different instantiations of the Universal 'presentness'.

(A trope theoretic solution may in fact be simpler since we would have many unique tropes of presentness, each related to one another by B-relations. The predicate 'is present' would then be satisfied by the set of all 'presentness' tropes. I leave it to the reader to determine which solution is more palatable.)

One could try to object, here, by taking the view that the present is mereologically simple (that is, treat the minimal duration of the present as an extended simple) such that the present has no parts and, as such, that 'portions' were not legitimate objects of quantification and, so, could not be earlier or later than one another.

I don't think this is right, although I am happy to allow that the present be *mereologically* simple. To say that the present lacks any internal mereological structure simply means that no portion of the present is a proper part of the present. But that *does not* mean that such portions fail to exist. For instance, suppose that I am an extended simple: it's still possible that I have hands, feet, legs, etc.; it's just not true to say that these are my parts.

It is, in fact, essential to the versions of presentism being assayed here, that the present have regions—even if the present turns out to be mereologically simple. If these portions didn't exist, then we would have nothing to give us duration since, as argued above, we only have duration if we have some temporal position later than another. If there were no regions we should have nothing that could stand in these relations. Thus, the mereological structure of the present simply isn't relevant here.

Presentism 'McTaggarted'

We have established that each of the many regions of 'the present' stand in B-theoretic relations to each of the other regions of the present. Consider, then, two portions of the present, r_1 and r_2, where r_1 is earlier than r_2. It then seems as if r_2 is future. It must be, since r_1 is present and r_2 is later than r_1. However, r_2 is also

present and so is past *and* present. Consider, further, portion r_3, which is later than both r_1 and r_2: since r_3 is also present, and is later than r_2, so r_2 must be past. This generates the conclusion that r_2 is past, present and future. This is, if you like, a miniature version of McTaggart's paradox; applied, rather than as McTaggart conceived of it to the whole of time, to the present.

But since this is so, this also suggests a number of ways that the presentist might try and avoid the paradox. It's generally accepted, after all, that McTaggart's argument don't show that time is unreal. If these arguments work against McTaggart's arguments, surely they will work against the argument that I've just put forward. The solutions to McTaggart's paradox that I'll canvass here are: (1) a tenseless semantics; (2) a tensed semantics.

Before we get to these, though, one might wonder whether or not there truly is a paradox here. We have what amounts to a B-theoretic present. B-theory doesn't give rise to a paradox, so where's the problem for the presentist?

We find ourselves in a situation where a region, r_2, is present (undeniably so since it exists) and it is later than something else, r_1. It's hard to see, then, how we avoid saying that r_2 is future. To avoid saying that r_2 is future would require some perverse mangling of our understanding of what it is for one thing to be later than another. It would require us to say that one entity can be present, and that another entity can be later than our first entity without contriving to be future.

Consider this observation, made by Craig Bourne (a presentist) in discussion of the presentist solution to the problem of finding truth-makers for truths about the past and future. Bourne writes that our theory, 'must preserve our views about which statements are true and which false' (Bourne 2006: 1). One such statement is surely that, 'if r_1 is present and r_2 is later than r_1, then r_2 is future'.

So is there a way of suitably modifying a tenseless semantics for tensed sentences (such that at r_1 it is true that, 'r_2 is future') whilst denying that this constitutes a genuine problem for the presentist? We could try by saying something like:

> At r_1 a sentence token, u, of 'r_2 is future' is true if and only if r_2 is later than r_1[10]

This would preserve the truth of the claim, at r_1, that 'r_2 is future'. But it does so at a cost. In specifying a tenseless semantics for tensed sentences we render all talk about times other than the present, false. Take, for instance, the sentence 'it will rain in Nottingham'. That sentence, if true, will have to satisfy the truth-conditional formula:

> At t, a sentence token, u, of 'it will rain in Nottingham', is true if and only if u is earlier than it raining in Nottingham

Since the presentist ontology lacks the resources to make that true, lacking B-relations that span more than the present moment, so all such claims are false.[11]

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[10] I'll set to one side here how this account would deal with present tensed sentences. I worry that we'll end up having to allow that 'x is present' is true because, for all x, x is present. So we'll end up with a mixed tensed-tenseless semantics. The coherence of that may be doubted. The only attempt to do something *like* reconciling the two views appears in Tooley (1997). See Oaklander (2001) for my reasons for thinking that such moves will fail.

[11] I'm supposing here that the meta-language states our ontological commitments.

That, of course, means that nothing *has* ever happened, and nothing ever *will* happen which would *imply* that time is unreal. This is, of course, McTaggart's conclusion once again.

Of course, the presentist might just deny the truth of these problem sentences, such as: 'if r_1 is present and r_2 is later than r_1, then r_2 is future'. But, as I indicated above, to give up on the truth of intuitively true sentences is *not* a theoretical cost that the presentist should welcome.[12]

Another move might be to modify the truth-conditions, thus:

At *t*, if R1 is present and R2 is later than R1 and not also present, then R2 is future.[13]

The trouble with this revised version is that it cannot be genuinely tense*less*. At *t*, it isn't true that R2 is "later than R1" if R2 is not also present: at least, not in the sense that R2 stands in a B-relation to R1. The only way that the *presentist* would be able to understand the claim that, "R2 is later than R1", where R2 doesn't exist, would be to say that, "R1 is the case and R2 *will* be the case".[14] Thus, this metalanguage is *not* tenseless and so the truth-conditions cannot be stated tenselessly. It's a tensed solution in disguise.

So then, what *about* a 'tensed' solution? Tensed theorists of time (and presentists are supposed to be tensed theorists so let's at least look at their 'solution') typically deny that there is even an appearance of a contradiction. To borrow from (a non-presentist) Lowe (1998: 91), the most that we are committed to is that,

For any event, *e*, (i) it either was, is now, or will be true to say '*e* has happened', and (ii) it either was, is now or will be true to say, '*e* is happening now', and (iii) it either was, is now, or will be true to say, '*e* will happen.

The thought, then, might be that it is never true to say at any portion of the present that, '*e* is past *and* present', or, '*e* is past *and* future'; and provided we avoid that, we avoid the paradox.

But I don't see how this will work. If we allow that r_1 and r_2 are both present (and for all x, x is present according to the presentist) and that r_2 is later than r_1, we are surely obliged to say that r_2 'is future'. And since r_2 exist, it's present and so it must also be true to say of r_2 that 'r_2 is present'. Thus, r_2 'is present' and 'is future'. The Lowean strategy won't avail us here, since unlike Lowe, the presentist seems obliged to include some B-theoretic structure into their ontology.[15] No matter which way we turn, then, presentism seems committed to a contradiction and should be rejected, at least in its current forms.

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[12] With an eye to the wider dialectic it's worth noting that the presentist (and "tensed" theorist in general) typically argues *against* their opponent by attempting to show that the opponent cannot adequately preserve the truth of tensed sentences. Were the presentist to then also fail to preserve the truth of intuitively true sentences, then the presentist would substantially weaken their own dialectical position.

[13] Again, I owe an anonymous referee thanks for this suggestion.

[14] I'm obviously assuming that the arguments above are sufficient to warrant rejection of the ersatzer B-theory solutions that *could* generate something akin to a tenseless base for these tensed claims.

[15] The only other way for the presentist to generate duration would be to say that the present was past, present and future. That, clearly, commits us to the paradox.

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