

## *Presentists may say goodbye to A-properties*

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Philosophers of time say that presentism is a version of the A-theory of time.<sup>1</sup> However, I'll argue that a presentist may actually deny the A-theory by reducing tensed A-properties to tenseless B-properties. The upshot is that a presentist may enjoy the parsimony of a tenseless (non-A) theory of time. This discovery serves to advance our understanding of time and clarify the positions under dispute.

### *1. Presentism and the A-theory*

The first order of business is to unpack the meanings of both 'presentism' and 'the A-theory'. Start with 'presentism':

(P) Everything presently exists.

In symbols:

(P)  $\forall x (Px)$ ,

where 'Px' is read 'x presently exists' (and ' $\forall x$ ' is unrestricted). The idea is that if we take an inventory of everything there is, we will include things that presently exist, but we won't include anything else; we will not include things that merely *did* exist or *will* exist. So, won't include Socrates or my great grandkids.

I assume that 'presently exists' does not mean the same as 'exists'; otherwise, (P) would be the thesis that everything exists, and that thesis is not about time. Nevertheless, some philosophers – for instance, the so-called *very serious tenses* – may object that 'presently exists' does mean the same as 'exists' because 'exists' is present tense. This objection has generated debate over how to define 'presentism' in a way that's intelligible to very serious tenses (see, for example, [Crisp 2004](#), [Ludlow 2004](#) and [Meyer 2005](#)). I won't enter that debate here, however, because in seeking to develop a tenseless version of presentism, I will assume (for the sake of argument) that tenseless quantification is intelligible.

(P) is adequate for our purposes. You are certainly welcome to fine-tune the definition: for example, you may prefix the definition with a box operator or a temporal operator (such as, 'it's always the case that') or adjust the definition so that it doesn't rule out the existence of timeless things. I'll

1 Examples include [Craig \(2000\)](#); [Markosian \(2010\)](#); [Sider \(2001\)](#); [Tooley \(1997\)](#); [Zimmerman \(2005\)](#), to name a few. I've found none who say otherwise.

leave (P) as is, however, for these adjustments don't affect the arguments to come.

Consider next 'the A-theory', which expresses a cluster of claims about what McTaggart (1908, 1927: 303) called the 'A-series'. The A-series consists of 'positions in time' (times and/or events) that are characterized by *A-properties* – properties such as *being past* (to various degrees), *being future* (to various degrees) and *being present*.<sup>2</sup> A-theorists who believe there are times endorse the following theses:

- (1) Times form an A-series.
- (2) The times in the A-series are constantly *changing* with respect to which A-properties they have.

And all A-theorists, whether or not they believe in times, endorse this:

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

These theses constitute the central doctrines of the A-theory (see Markosian 2010).

## 2. Presentism without the A-theory

To show why presentists need not accept the A-theory, I will present a theory that is compatible with presentism but incompatible with doctrine (3) of the A-theory. The theory I'll present treats *times* as maximal, consistent propositions.<sup>3</sup> I'll call the theory *Tenseless*. Tenseless consists of the following three theses (cf. Crisp 2007: 105):

- (4)  $(\forall t) (\text{Present}(t) \leftrightarrow_{\text{F}} \text{True}(t))$
- (5)  $(\forall t) (\text{Past}(t) \leftrightarrow_{\text{F}} \exists t_2 (\text{Present}(t_2), \text{EarlierThan}(t, t_2)))$
- (6)  $(\forall t) (\text{Future}(t) \leftrightarrow_{\text{F}} \exists t_2 (\text{Present}(t_2), \text{LaterThan}(t, t_2)))$

where ' $(\forall t)$ ' ranges over times, and ' $A \leftrightarrow_{\text{F}} B$ ' abbreviates 'if it is a fact that *A*, then *the fact that A* is identical with *the fact that B*'. (4) says, then, that for any time that is present, the fact that it is present is identical with the fact that it is true. (5) says that for any time that is past, the fact that it is past is identical with the fact that it is earlier than a time that is present. (6) says that for any time that is future, the fact that it is future is identical with the fact that it is later than a time that's present.

I stipulate that 'is', as it's used in Tenseless, is tenseless. In keeping with Tenseless, we may also assume that times are expressible using tenseless

2 I use the term 'property' in a broad sense to include relational properties (and what McTaggart called 'determinations').

3 More precisely:  $x$  is a time  $\text{=}_{\text{df}} \forall p (p \text{ is a proposition} \rightarrow ((\Box(x \rightarrow p) \vee \Box(x \rightarrow \sim p))) \wedge \Diamond(x \text{ is true}))$ . Cf. Crisp 2007: 100.

language. (I will later say more about tenseless terms and consider whether tenseless propositions can change in truth-value.)

Tenseless analyses the A-properties of *being past*, *being present* and *being future* in terms of the B-relations of *earlier than* and *later than*.<sup>4</sup> This analysis is incompatible with doctrine (3) of the A-theory, which says that facts about A-properties are not reducible to facts about B-relations. Therefore, Tenseless is incompatible with the A-theory.

I will now argue that Tenseless is compatible with presentism. To be clear, I won't argue that it is metaphysically possible that Tenseless and presentism are both true. (*That* claim arguably entails presentism.<sup>5</sup>) Rather, I'll argue that there is no clear reason why one cannot consistently conjoin presentism with Tenseless.

To illustrate how Tenseless may be conjoined with presentism, I propose the following four theses, each of which an *ersatz* presentist may endorse. Firstly, times are abstract entities (e.g. maximal propositions) that bear primitive earlier than and later than relations to one another. Secondly, there's always only *one* time that is true.<sup>6</sup> Thirdly, times are constantly changing (in a Cambridge way). For example, over the course of a year, a time that is 7 years earlier than a time that is true becomes just 6 years earlier than a time that is true. Fourthly, there's a distinction between a time that *presently exists* and a time that *is present*. An ersatz presentist thinks that everything presently exists (including past and future times) but does not thereby think that every time is present. To clarify this distinction, a presentist may define '*x* is present' as '*x* is a time and *x* is true' (in lieu of Tenseless) and define '*x* presently exists' as 'the proposition that *x* exists is entailed by a time *t*, where *t* is present'. (Note: my purpose isn't to defend ersatz presentism; I aim, rather, to show that if ersatz presentism is open for discussion and debate, then so, too, is a tenseless version of presentism.)

Now, why consider the conjunction of presentism with Tenseless as open for discussion? It is because there is not a clear way to deduce the falsity

4 Tenseless is not complete because there are also tensed facts that report a *degree* to which a given time is past or future. We can complete the theory easily enough by analysing degrees of pastness and futurity in terms of degrees of earlier than and later than: for example, the fact that *t* is millions of years past is identical to the fact that *t* is millions of years earlier than the time that obtains. Nothing turns on these extra details; so, for ease of presentation I won't discuss them further.

5 Here's the argument: (i) suppose it's possible that Tenseless and presentism are true; (ii) then it's possible that presentism is true; (iii) necessarily, if presentism is true, then presentism is necessarily true; therefore, (iv) if it's possible that presentism is true, then it's possible that presentism is necessarily true; (v) if it's possible that presentism is necessarily true, then presentism is true (by S5); therefore, (vi) presentism is true.

6 More precisely:  $\forall t (t \text{ is a time that is true}) \rightarrow \sim \exists t^* (t^* \text{ is true} \ \& \ t^* \neq t)$ .

of presentism from Tenseless (or vice versa). Here is the best attempt I have seen:

- (7) If Tenseless is true, then for every time  $t$ ,  $t$  is present if and only if  $t$  is true.
- (8) Any time that is [tenselessly] *true* is eternally true.
- (9) The time  $t$  when there were tyrannosaurs was present.
- (10) Therefore, if Tenseless is true, then  $t$  was eternally true. (7–9)
- (11) If  $t$  was eternally true, then  $t$  is eternally true.
- (12) If  $t$  is eternally true, then there are tyrannosaurs.
- (13) Therefore, if Tenseless is true, then there are tyrannosaurs. (10–12)
- (14) If presentism is true, then there aren't any tyrannosaurs.
- (15) Therefore, if Tenseless is true, then presentism is not true. (13, 14)

I'll focus on premiss (8) of the argument, which says that if a time is [tenselessly] true, then it is eternally true. I realize that many *eternalists* think this, but must a *presentist* agree?

One might defend (8) on the grounds that 'is true', when treated as tenseless, just means the same thing as 'is eternally true'. In that case, (8) would be analytic.

I perceive two problems with that defence. First, it's not obvious that tenseless 'is true' means the same thing as 'is eternally true'. Philosophers have expressed differing views about the semantic role of tenseless expressions. Some (Oaklander (2010: 237); Tooley (1997: 305); Zimmerman (2005: 407–9)) have suggested that such expressions serve to express propositions that never change in truth-value, whereas others (Crisp (2007: 98–99); Mason (2006: 119–20); cf. Smith (1993: 7)) have suggested that they are expressions that don't express irreducible A-properties.<sup>7</sup> Who's right? That is up for debate and therefore, (8) is debatable; therefore, a tenseless version of presentism remains up for debate.

Secondly, even if we stipulate that tenseless 'is true' means the same thing as 'is eternally true', we may still express Tenseless in tenseless terms without using 'is eternally true'. To see how, let 'true<sub>1</sub>' express the property of *being presently true*, and let 'true<sub>2</sub>' express the property of *being eternally true*. Notice that both terms contain the word, 'true'. One explanation for this is that the two terms express determinates of a common determinable – namely, *being true simpliciter*. If that's so (and it's not obviously *not* so), then we may

7 Crisp (2007: 98–99) says that a tenseless expression expresses a proposition  $p$ , such that it is possible to grasp or conceive of  $p$  without thereby grasping pastness, presentness or futureness. But as Oaklander (2010: 236) points out, if any of these A-properties is indeed reducible to a B-property, then anyone who conceives of this B-property thereby conceives of an A-property. The result is that propositions about the present aren't tenseless *even if* the property of being present is reducible to a B-property. That's clearly not the right result. We may fix this by defining a tenseless expression as one that doesn't express *irreducible* pastness, presentness or futureness.

let ‘true<sub>3</sub>’ express *being true simpliciter*. Now *being true simpliciter* is not an A-property (as B-theorists may include it in their ontology), and therefore, we may treat occurrences of ‘is true’ in Tenseless as meaning the same as ‘true<sub>3</sub>’. The result is this: it is not analytically necessary that whatever is true<sub>3</sub> is thereby eternally true, for ‘true<sub>3</sub>’ doesn’t mean the same thing as ‘is eternally true’. Therefore, (8) isn’t analytic.

We may try to develop other arguments in support of (8) or replies to the above considerations. Alternatively, we may seek to develop entirely different arguments for the incompatibility of presentism and Tenseless. However, it is not immediately obvious how such arguments would go. At this point in the dialectic, it is not clear what’s wrong with combining presentism with a tenseless theory of time. I have reached my target goal, then: I’ve developed a new theory of time that combines presentism with a tenseless (non-A) theory of time.

### 3. *Change without the A-theory*

Can we de-tense our talk about *change*? If not, then in so far as there *is* change (as presentists ordinarily believe), presentism is incompatible with a tenseless theory of time.

But presentists can de-tense talk about change if the following is true:

- (16) For any  $x$ , the fact that  $x$  is changing from *being*  $\alpha$  to *being*  $\beta$  is identical with the fact that there are times  $t$  and  $t^*$ , such that (i)  $t$  is true, (ii)  $t$  entails that  $x$  is  $\alpha$ , (iii)  $t^*$  is later than  $t$  and (iv)  $t^*$  entails that  $x$  is  $\beta$ .

This principle analyses facts about change to tenseless facts concerning relations between times. A presentist may accept (16). because there’s nothing in (16) that implies that any non-presently existing things exist. Thus, a presentist may accept a tenseless theory of change.

Let’s sum up. Tenseless is incompatible with the A-theory because it is incompatible with doctrine (3) of the A-theory. On the other hand, there is no clear reason why a *presentist* cannot accept Tenseless. Hence, there is no clear reason why a presentist must accept the A-theory, and therefore, presentism is not a version of the A-theory.<sup>8</sup>

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