

## Problem of Time and the Dilemma of Presentism

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### Abstract

This paper engages in a critique of the problem of time and a presentist approach to the problem. The metaphysical problem of time bothers on the question of whether time exists the same way some other existents in the universe are said to exist. There have been arguments for and against the position of the reality of time. One of the metaphysical positions on the reality of time is presentism. Presentism is the view that only the present constitutes the reality of time. Past and future are unreal and do not constitute time. Thus, the position of presentism, unlike other positions on the reality of time, posits real existence of times to be that which is present. This paper seeks to argue that presentism is self-stultifying and faces a dilemma that shows that the theory either posits the unreality of time (which will be opposing to what it purportedly stands for) or it admits of other features of time (that is, past and future). Either way, presentism is faced with a challenge that it is an inadequate theory of addressing the problem of time.

**Key words:** Presentism; Tense; Time; Triviality argument; Truthmaking

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### INTRODUCTION

The problem of time is one of the problems that philosophers, since ancient Greek, have been concerned

with. The question that bothers philosophers about time is on the reality of time. Philosophers such as Aristotle, Plotinus and J. M. E. McTaggart have argued and taken positions on the reality of time. In most recent literature on the problem of time, J. M. E. McTaggart's paper, on the unreality of time, is arguably, most referenced and it presents the take-off point for most contemporary arguments on the problem of time (McTaggart, 1908). Although, McTaggart's submission is that time is not real, subsequent positions (held by other philosophers) on the problem of time have taken off from his distinction of the order of time into A-series and B-series. For the A-series, McTaggart argues that time has the characteristics of past, present and future. Distinction of the order of time in this regard, according to him, is temporary and it accredits to time the phenomenon of change.

On the other hand are the B-series characteristics of time, that is, the ordering of time into the relational concepts of "earlier than" and "later than". This he argues is permanent. The B-series which is relational and permanent in nature, McTaggart argues, cannot represent the nature of time. The A-series, for him, involves contradiction as there is an underlining implication that every moment must have the characteristics of the past, present and the future at the same time. Thus, McTaggart submits that time is not real.

This submission notwithstanding, contemporary philosophers' discourse on the problem of time has majored on the distinction made by McTaggart. In Nathan Oaklander's wonder, the contemporary discourse on the problem of time has been,

the debate between those who hold the tensed or A-theory of time, those who hold the tenseless or B-theory of time, and those who hold a hybrid A-B theory of time. The debate between these three theories concerns the question of whether the ultimate metaphysical nature of time is to be understood in terms of temporal becoming, temporal relations or both temporal becoming and temporal relations. (Oaklander, 1998)

Among these positions cited by Oakland that have foundations in McTaggart's distinction of the order of time into A-series and B-series is that of presentism. Presentism is the view that only the present constitute the reality of time. Past and future are unreal and do not constitute time. It is, however, imperative to state that presentism departs from the traditional distinction of the A-series ordering of time into past, present and future. Of these three characteristics of the A-series order of time, presentism acknowledges only one – that is, the present – as that which constitutes time.

In this paper, I shall try to examine a formulation of the theory of presentism, its thesis, and challenges. I shall argue that the position of presentism (understood in the formulation examined) is faced with a dilemma which portrays a stultifying challenge to presentism and as such submit that presentism does not present an adequate theory for addressing the problem of time.

## 1. AN EXAMINATION OF PRESENTISM

Presentism, like most theories in philosophy, has assumed different formulations. This is so given the fact that advocates of the theory tend to adjust in addressing challenges against the theory. This, however, does not mean that there is no underlining thesis for the theory. Ned Markosian, for instance, defines presentism as

...the view that only presents objects exist. According to Presentism, if we are to make an accurate list of all things that exist – i.e. a list of all the things that our most unrestricted quantifiers range over – there would be not a single non-present object on the list. (Markosian, 2004, p.47)

From this definition, one may literally take presentism to mean that only “present” things exist in the strict sense of the word. But according to James van Cleve, “presentists are not holocaust deniers; their insistence that nothing past exists is compatible with their affirming truths about what happened using tense operators.” (Van Cleve, 2009, pp.80-81) From van Cleve's position, one would see that the position of presentism is not to deny people or events that had happened at an earlier time, but that the presentist language only accords truth-value to statements in tenseless forms. With regard to this definition as well, presentism is faced with some challenges.

One of these is that presentism is often defined in terms of what it is not rather than what it is. This is evident in the definition that portrays the theory as holding past and future events as non-existents. On the other hand, the seemingly positive definition of presentism that tends to define it in terms of what it is rather than what it is not is faced with a further problem. This problem is termed the triviality problem. Jesse Mulder argues that

defining the view – in terms of a suitable, tensed existence claim, that is – turn out to be either trivially true (so that

they are acceptable to everyone, including eternalists) or trivially false (so that they are acceptable to nobody, including presentists). (Mulder, 2016)

I will return to the triviality argument shortly, the focus here is to understand the formulations of presentism. Thus, in avoiding the challenges against a negative approach of defining presentism in terms of what it is not, a positive approach to its definition employs the tensed-tenseless method of expressing existents.

To make sense of the explanation above, illustration may be of help. The philosopher, Socrates, existed in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC (in the past) and not in the present. The next Olympics games are yet to come and are in the future. Presentism does not outrightly deny the existence of Socrates (past) and the Olympic games (future), it has a way of expressing them to imply that they exist and not that one had existed and the other will exist. For instance, instead of saying: “Socrates was a Greek philosopher” or “The Olympic games *will* hold in 2036”, the presentist will express these statements as follow: “It has been that Socrates *is* a Greek philosopher” and “It will be that there is Olympics games in 2036”.<sup>1</sup> From these examples, one can thus infer that the position of presentism that only present entities exist does not strictly exclude things we *ordinarily* take to be in the past or in the future but that these can be expressed to portray the idea of “presentness” in them.

## 2. THE CHARGE OF TRIVIALITY AGAINST PRESENTISM

Given the above explication of presentism, one may be tempted to reduce presentism to a mere linguistic approach of addressing issues. That is, that presentism is not a substantive theory in the problem of time but rather a way of using language to express the existence of entities in time. However, this does not seem to hold the substance. It is true that presentism has a language of expressing the existence of entities in time, it is concerned with a more tangible question in the problem of time and that is – if time is real (or exists) – of what nature will time be? The nature of time, I think, is a more substantive question that presentism is concerned but the presentist language is just a way of buttressing its position.

The objection from language points to another objection that has been levelled against presentism. This objection is called the triviality objection. The triviality charge against presentism goes thus: If it is granted, according to presentism, that only present things exist or that only things in the present exist, then presentism is either trivially true or trivially false. The claim that only

<sup>1</sup> This idea of the presentist's form of expressing propositions in this manner is credited to David Lewis in his paper “Tensed Quantifier” in D. W. Zimmerman (Ed.). (2004). *Oxford Studies in Metaphysics*, 1, 6.

present things exist suggests that this existence is in the present. Put in other words, one can say “only present things exist now”. This interpretation will be a mere truism. This is so because it neither justifies anything nor gives a new piece of information about what exist and when they exist. Presentism, understood in this way, only restates an obvious truth. On the other hand, if presentism is interpreted to hold that “only present things existed, exist or will exist”, the tensed verb will indicate a contradiction. For example, to say that “The Wall of Jericho existed, exists or will exist” will be false and contradictory because the Wall of Jericho is not in the present. Also, if presentism is interpreted to hold that “only present things (tenselessly) exist”, then this would suggest an ambiguous sense of existence, for it cannot be said whether to quantify the existence in the past, present or future. This way too, presentism is considered false (Crisp, 2004). Another implication of the triviality argument, according to Mulder, is that if interpreted in the first sense that suggests trivial truth, then it would be consistent with the position of the eternalists who hold an opposing view to that of the presentist – the view that every point in time is real. On the side of trivial falsehood, Mulder claims that the second interpretation of presentism tends to be unacceptable even to presentist themselves (Mulder, 2016).

Thomas Crisp, however, argues that the triviality argument is unsound and false. For Crisp,

Suppose that eternalism is true. Then our most inclusive domain of quantification includes wholly past and wholly future objects, where these are objects that occupy past times or future times, but not the present time. If so, then it's false that for every  $x$  – quantifying over all temporal entities –  $x$  is a present thing. The Roman Empire existed, for instance, and it isn't a present thing. Since, according to the eternalist, the domain of temporal things includes the Roma Empire, if eternalism is true,  $(Pr_b)$ <sup>2</sup> isn't. But eternalism isn't manifestly false: I, at any rate, can't just see that the domain of temporal things includes no wholly past or future entities. Since eternalism isn't manifestly false,  $(Pr_b)$  isn't trivially true. (Crisp, 2004)

Crisp's defence of presentism stems from the fact that presentism is formulated in the background of an eternalist conception of time. He holds that the reasons in support of eternalism are not impressive enough to have one jettison presentism. For him, in trying to express the claim that the Roman Empire existed in a presentist language, one may say: “For some  $x$ ,  $x$  is the Roman Empire and  $x$  will not exist in  $t_0$ ” (Ibid.). In this presentist language,  $t_0$  refers to the present times. Thus, that statement expresses the initial/original statement in a presentist language without having to assume that the Roman Empire is still in existence in the present moment. Crisp's defence of presentism against the triviality challenge seems appealing but it only reflects the presentist's tradition

of formulating the theory in order to meet challenges. I consider the triviality objection a genuine one that poses a serious threat to presentism. Crisp's defence is a resort to a reformulation of the interpretation of the presentist's expression so as to avoid the trivially true or trivially false claim. Even with this, Crisp's reformulation does not address the challenge of triviality.

From the point of view of what Ned Markosian calls the “tensed conception of semantics” which is the view that verbal tenses of ordinary language...must be taken as primitive and unanalysable and that have truth-value at times rather than having truth-value simpliciter (Carroll, 2010, p.164), one may argue that Crisp's re-interpretation does not take into consideration the importance of tenses or tensing for the truth-value of statements. If presentists are to adopt the form of interpretation suggested by Crisp, then they still have to address the challenge of trivial falsehood levelled against presentism for it will still be faced with explaining the correlation between things that have existed in the past that no longer exist and the claim only present things exist.

### 3. SOME FURTHER OBJECTIONS AGAINST PRESENTISM

One other challenge against presentism, though not a serious one, is the commonsensical view that presentism is averse to natural language. Natural languages in every human society have tensed terms of expressing past, present and future events and these terms form a meaningful means of communicating ideas among human beings. For instance, it makes a perfect and meaningful form of communication to say that “Jesus was born in Nazareth 2000 years ago”. It also makes sense, in ordinary natural language to say “Nigeria will host the FIFA World Cup in 2050”. Both statements express events in the past and that of the future which presentism denies as being real. Given the fact that there is a meaningful expression of past, present and future events in ordinary natural language shows that the burden of proof lies on presentism to counter-prove that these ways of expressing our thoughts about events (past and future) are meaningless. Presentism will have to overturn the foundation of natural language in this regard to make meaning of its own position against the commonsensical usage of language and its expression.

A critic may argue that the commonsensical objection does not hold water since it is quite possible that the way natural language is used to express events in time is a perversion which has caused more confusion in trying to address the problem of time. One way to respond to this, I think, is to admit that the expression of thoughts about events and entities in the natural language may not be error-free but that the fact that such usage forms a meaningful means of expression and communication

<sup>2</sup>  $(Pr_b)$  refers to the proposition “For every  $x$ ,  $x$  is a present thing”.

shows that an otherwise suggestion will have more to prove. For in the presentist language, it is a bit difficult making sense of entities that are non-present, that is, entities that were in the past or that will be in the future.

Another objection to be considered against presentism is that from the standpoint of truthmaking. Ben Caplan and David Sanson capture the thesis of truthmaking thus:

Some propositions – for example, the proposition that Saul Kripke is a philosopher – is true. Other propositions – for example, the proposition that Saul Kripke is a barber – are not. This is no accident. Reality has a say in which propositions are true and which are not. There are various ways of capturing this idea. One is to say that there cannot be a difference in truth – in which propositions are true – unless there is a difference in being: in what there is or what it's like. In short, truth supervenes on being. This view is known as Truthmaking. (Caplan & Sanson, 2011)

In simple terms, the position of truthmaking is that for every true statement, there is something, in reality, that makes it true. Thus, the statement “Nigeria is the most populous black nation in the world” is made true by demographic facts about Nigeria. There is the reality about the state of Nigeria’s population which makes that statement true. The objection against presentism in this regard stems from the fact that there seems to be no truthmakers for presentist expression about past or future events. For example, the statement “There were dinosaurs” can be interpreted in a presentist language as “It has been the case that there are dinosaurs”. However, taken in this presentist form, there seems to be no truthmaker for this statement. In other words, there seems to be no fact in the present reality that supports the truth-value of that statement. One way presentists may tend to defend their position is to point to a shortcoming in the project of truthmaking and that is, to claim that truthmaking does not account for negative existential truths (Tallant, 2009). For example, how do we determine the truthmaker of negative statements like “There are no arctic penguins”? There seems to be no existing fact *in reality* that tends to make this statement true. This objection may raise a challenge for the idea of truthmaking, it however does not address the objection of truthmaking against presentism because it is not in all cases that true statements are expressed in negative terms.

## CONCLUSION

As said earlier, presentism is the view that only present things exist (constitute reality). The position of this paper is that presentism is faced with a dilemma which portrays it as an inadequate theory in addressing the problem of time. To start with, one of the ordering of time includes the characteristics of past, present and the future. Each of these characteristics disappears into

the other, for example, it is the future that becomes the present and it is the present that slips into the past. There seems to be a causal link between events in this regard. But presentism denies the past and the future. For presentism, only the present constitute reality. This raises the question on the temporality of the present which presentism claims to constitute reality and also a further question on how it comes to be. Is the present permanently present or it is dynamic. One great attribute of time is change (dynamism). This attribute calls to question the nature of the present which forms the basis of reality in presentism.

Time changes and if one agrees with presentism that the present constitutes the reality, given the factor of change, how does one account for the temporality of that which is in the present. For example, if one has to write an exam in a metaphysics course from 9:00 am to 12:00 noon, how does one account for every passing moment within those hours of the exam even when the exam is still ongoing. In other words, whatever one has done around 9:51 am in the exam hall has been in the past at 11:15 am when the exam is still ongoing. The claim here is that presentism is beset with the problem of what the nature of the present itself is. If the presentist account is that the present is that which exists “now”, then it is faced with a further problem of what “now” represents. If the presentist, in turn, says “now” represents that which is simultaneous with being talking or doing or engaging in an activity, then there is the problem that every action is fraught with passing moments which makes it difficult to pinpoint the exact point in the activity that “now” or “present” is simultaneous with.

Having denied time of the characteristics of past and future and given the problem attached to explain the nature of the present which implies that the foundation of presentism is faulty, then there is a subtle implication that presentism admits of the unreality of time. This implication, I think, is opposed to the position of presentism but it is a challenge that stares presentism in the face.

On the other hand, to make sense of its idea of the present and given causal connections between events in the past and the present or events in the present and future, presentism may want to admit to the reality of the past and the future. This, I think, would also be contradictory to the thesis of presentism. In another vein, a presentist may argue that the past and future do not constitute reality but events in them are acknowledged using presentist language. This argument seems confusing and it constitutes the foundation of the challenges that have been raised against the theory of presentism. I do not, however, claim that this dilemma is exhaustive of what presentism can be subjected to (to avoid the fallacy of false dilemma) but that they are arguments to show the shortcomings of the theory of

presentism as inadequate in addressing the problem of time.

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