

The Way Things Were*

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1. Introduction

Presentists say that only the present is real.¹ Saying that might seem like a pretty good way of accounting for what is special about the present, but it might also seem like a pretty bad way of accounting for anything about the past.

To begin with, presentists face an ontological challenge. To say that only the present is real is, in part, to say that only presently existing things exist, that existence is present existence. The ontological challenge is to account for merely past things like Socrates or Hunter S. Thompson, things that were but are no more. This challenge has been widely discussed in the recent literature, where many of the stock characters of late twentieth-century analytic metaphysics—noncommittal paraphrase, property bundles, uninstantiated haecceities, quasi-truth, and so on—have been called upon to play their stock roles in various

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¹ See, for example, Hinchliff 1988, Bigelow 1996, Markosian 2004. On how to state presentism, see Crisp 2004a, 2004b; Ludlow 2004.

attempts to show that presentists can happily eliminate merely past things from their ontology.²

But the ontological challenge is not the only challenge that presentists face; presentists also face an ideological challenge. To say that only the present is real is to say, not just that only presently existing things exist, but also that the only properties and relations that things instantiate are the properties and relations that they presently instantiate. In brief, to say that only the present is real is to say, not just that existence is present existence, but also that instantiation is present instantiation. The ideological challenge is to account for the way things were, for the properties and relations that things once instantiated.

The literature suggests a fairly straightforward solution to the ideological challenge: facts about how things once were, it turns out, just are special facts about how things are now (for example, facts about the present instantiation of primitive “tensed” properties). In this paper, we argue that solutions of this sort are wrong. We begin, in the next section, by considering a simple solution of this sort.

2. The Governor Gets a Tan

Suppose that, bemoaning his pallor, Arnold goes to the beach and gets a tan. So he was pale, but he is no longer. Consider the proposition—call it ‘*A*’—that Arnold was pale. *A*, it seems, is a true proposition. Here’s a fairly natural line of thought: *A* is true in virtue of a certain fact concerning Arnold and the properties that he instantiates. Given presentism, the only properties that Arnold instantiates are properties that he presently instantiates, so we need to identify a property that is such that the fact that Arnold presently instantiates it suffices to make *A* true. Here’s a proposal: that property is *having been pale*.

Some philosophers object to the idea that true propositions correspond to facts in this way. That, they say, is too simplistic a conception of the relation between truth and the world. Still, many accept the weaker claim that truth supervenes upon the world: no difference in truth, the motto goes, without some difference in the world.³ Given this weaker principle, the challenge for a presentist is not the fairly specific challenge of identifying the fact to which *A* corresponds but rather the somewhat more general challenge of identifying some feature or features of the world, or of things in the world, such that it is plausible that, if *A* were false, the world, or things in the world, would lack that

² Markosian (2004) surveys many of these attempts.

³ See, for example, Bigelow 1988: 121–134, 1996: 38–39; Lewis 1992: 206–207, 2001; Keller 2004: 85–87. (The page numbers for Lewis 1992 are from the reprint in Lewis 1999.)

feature or those features. Upon what, then, does the truth of *A* supervene? The simplest and most natural answer, it seems, is much as before: the truth of *A* supervenes upon Arnold's present instantiation of the property *having been pale*. We take it that this is something like the view that Michael Rea (2003: 263) has in mind when he describes (but does not endorse) a presentist view on which "truths about the past and future are grounded in irreducibly tensed properties of material objects."

But the interest in the supervenience of truth upon the world, or—if we are naïve—in the correspondence of a true proposition with the facts, is, at least in part, an interest in a certain kind of explanation.⁴ We don't want a mere correlation between what is true and what the world is like; rather, we want the truth of a proposition to be *explained* by how things are in the world. And, at least in some paradigm cases, we want the truth of a proposition to be explained by how things are in a fairly restricted part of the world. For example, we want the truth of *A* to be explained by how things are with Arnold in Los Angeles, not by how things are with everyone in Canada.

On this point, we think that the simple solution to the ideological challenge fails: the truth of *A* is not properly explained by Arnold's presently instantiating the property *having been pale*. To see this, consider a contrast. In addition to the properties that he now has, there are also properties that Arnold once had. For example, *having been pale* is a property that Arnold now has, whereas *being pale* is a property that he once had. So we have two candidate explanations of the truth of *A*:

(PRESENT) The proposition that Arnold was pale is true because Arnold now has the property *having been pale*.

(PAST) The proposition that Arnold was pale is true because Arnold once had the property *being pale*.

It seems to us that (PAST) is a proper explanation of the truth of *A*; and it seems to us that, once this is recognized, it becomes clear that (PRESENT) is not.

No doubt we should say something here about what we mean by 'proper explanation'. The first thing to notice is that what counts as a proper explanation depends, in large part, upon what one is trying to explain. Suppose, for example, that we are trying to explain the presence of evil in the world, and suppose that, in fact, the presence of evil

⁴ See, for example, Keller 2004: 86.

in the world is due to the existence of an evil being; call it ‘Satan’. By hypothesis, then,

(SATAN) There is evil in the world because Satan exists.

is a proper explanation—a correct explanation, one that points to a genuine explanans—of the presence of evil in the world. A putative explanation can fail to be proper because it is just plain wrong:

(SANTA) There is evil in the world because Santa Claus exists.⁵

Or it can fail to be proper because, while it might point to something that is importantly related to something that figures in a proper explanation, it is not itself a proper explanation:

(SET) There is evil in the world because {Satan} exists.

We need not say that (SET) is just plain wrong: we can grant that it has *some* explanatory power. But its explanatory power is entirely due to the relation between Satan and {Satan}, on the one hand, and to (SATAN)’s being a proper explanation of the presence of evil in the world, on the other: the only reason that {Satan}’s existence has any bearing at all on the presence of evil in the world is that, if {Satan} exists, then Satan exists, and Satan’s existence is what a proper explanation of the presence of evil points to.

Our claim is that (PRESENT)—the explanation of the truth of *A* that appeals to Arnold’s now having the property *having been pale*—is, at best, like (SET): (PRESENT) might have *some* explanatory power, but whatever power it has is entirely due to the relation between Arnold’s now having the property *having been pale* and Arnold’s once having the property *being pale*, on the one hand, and to (PAST)’s being a proper explanation of the truth of *A*, on the other. That is, the only reason that Arnold’s now having the property *having been pale* has any bearing at all on the truth of the proposition that Arnold was pale is that, if Arnold now has the property *having been pale*, then he once had the property *being pale*, and his once having that property is what a proper explanation of the truth of *A* points to.

We think that this is obvious; but, if you don’t yet agree, consider an obvious asymmetry. It is because Arnold once had the property *being pale* that he now has the property *having being pale*. But the

⁵ We are assuming here that Santa Claus is not Satan.

reverse is not the case: it is not because Arnold now has the property *having being pale* that he once had the property *being pale*. To put the point metaphorically, that he now has the property *having been pale* is at best a symptom of the (unsightly) property he once had: *being pale*.

This asymmetry alone does not show that (PAST) is a proper explanation and (PRESENT) is not. For the same asymmetry holds between Arnold's existence and the existence of {Arnold}. But a proper explanation of the truth of the proposition that there are sets that have exactly one member is one that points to the existence of {Arnold}, not one that points to the existence of Arnold. The existence of Arnold, if it explains the relevant truth at all, does so only indirectly, by way of its relation to the existence of {Arnold}.

But, even so, the asymmetry is a reason to be suspicious: in metaphysics as in medicine, a symptom or trace is something that points us to the real disease; and, if what we are interested in is the real disease, then we should not be satisfied with an explanation that points only to a symptom. It seems obvious to us that, when it comes to the truth of the proposition that Arnold was pale, our interest lies not with the trace—Arnold's now instantiating *having been pale*—but rather with what it is a trace of: Arnold's once instantiating *being pale*.

It is somewhat difficult to bring out the asymmetry, given that, presumably, there is a necessary connection between once having the property *being pale* and now having the property *having been pale*: necessarily, anyone who once instantiated *being pale* now instantiates *having been pale*, and vice versa. But that there is such a necessary connection is no bar to an explanatory asymmetry: recall the case of Satan and {Satan}. Although it might well be necessary that Satan exists if and only if {Satan} does, a proper explanation of the presence of evil in the world is one that points to Satan rather than to {Satan}.

Nor does the existence of a necessary connection mean that one cannot imagine, *per impossibile*, that Arnold once had the property *being pale* without now having the property *having been pale* (or vice versa). One can imagine, in other words, that the two things—the disease and the symptom—come apart. When we so imagine, it seems to us that what we care about, in assessing the truth of *A*, is whether Arnold once had the property *being pale*, not whether he now has the property *having been pale*. Imagine that Arnold had the property *being pale* but now lacks the property *having been pale*: in such a situation, it seems true that Arnold was pale. Conversely, imagine that Arnold has the property *having been pale* but never had the property *being pale*: in such a situation, it does not seem true that Arnold was pale. This suggests that what matters, for the truth of *A*, is how Arnold once was, not how he now is, which in turn suggests that (PAST) is a proper

explanation of the truth of the proposition that Arnold was pale and that (PRESENT) is not.

One might be tempted to think that ‘Arnold’s now having the property *having been pale*’ and ‘Arnold’s once having the property *being pale*’ are really just two descriptions of the same fact. In that case, if an explanation that points to the fact that the one describes is proper, then so is an explanation that points to the fact that the other describes. In much the same way, one might think that, since ‘Superman’ and ‘Clark Kent’ refer to the same person, if an explanation that points to the existence of the person that the one refers to is proper, then so is an explanation that points to the existence of the person that the other refers to (however much one might be tempted to accept “Lex Luthor’s dastardly plans were foiled because Superman exists,” but not “Lex Luthor’s dastardly plans were foiled because Clark Kent exists,” as a proper explanation). But, although we accept that ‘Superman’ and ‘Clark Kent’ refer to the same person (at least in the fiction), we deny that ‘Arnold’s now having the property *having been pale*’ and ‘Arnold’s once having the property *being pale*’ describe the same fact. Arnold’s now having the property *having been pale* is a matter of how things are, of which properties things now instantiate. By contrast, Arnold’s once having the property *being pale* is a matter of how things were, of which properties things once instantiated. Since we distinguish the way things are and the way things were, we also distinguish Arnold’s now having the property *having been pale* and his once having the property *being pale*.

The argument in this section relied on a distinction—the distinction between Arnold’s now having the property *having been pale* and his once having had the property *being pale*—and an intuition that relies on that distinction: the intuition that the latter, and not the former, is what a proper explanation of the truth of the proposition that Arnold was pale points to. To our minds, this intuition is a powerful one that should not be denied lightly.

What, then, are the consequences of taking this intuition seriously? And what sort of presentist account of the past does this intuition suggest? In the remainder of this paper we attempt to answer these questions. In Section 3, we argue that many views that presentists have actually held violate this intuition. In Section 4, we consider a view that might, at first blush, appear to save the intuition; we argue that it does not. Finally, in Sections 5 and 6, we try to point toward the presentist position that the intuition demands and explain how it is fundamentally different from the solutions that violate the intuition.

We take the intuition seriously, and we think others should, too. But we are more confident in the negative claim that presentist views that violate the intuition aren’t viable than we are in the positive

claim that the presentist view we sketch at the end, which respects the intuition, is. Still, we think it is worth sketching such a view, in part to get a better sense of what respecting the intuition commits one to.

3. Presentism and the Truthmaking Problem

There has been a fair bit written recently about how presentists should solve what Simon Keller (2004: 85) calls the “Truthmaking Problem”: the problem, that is, of showing how, given presentism, it can be that the truth of propositions about the past or future supervenes upon being—upon what things exist and what properties and relations things instantiate. This literature tends to focus on the ontological challenge: how can the truth of a proposition about something that no longer exists, like Socrates, supervene only upon facts about things that presently exist?

But put aside the ontological challenge, and consider the ideological one: how can the truth of a proposition about how a thing was—even how a presently existing thing like Arnold was—supervene only upon facts about the properties things presently instantiate? The most common solutions, while confining themselves to things that presently exist, appeal to the present instantiation of properties that are of a kind with *having been pale: being such that Arnold was pale* (presently instantiated by eternal abstracta);⁶ or *being such that, in it, Arnold was pale* (presently instantiated by the world);⁷ or *being such that they composed something that was Arnold and that was pale* (presently instantiated by some eternal atoms);⁸ or *being such that it was instantiated by something that was pale* (presently instantiated by an eternal haecceity).⁹

If the challenge were to save mere supervenience, then these solutions might work: as we granted above, the only counterexamples—the only cases in which the present instantiation of such properties comes apart from the past instantiation of ordinary properties like *being pale*—are impossible. But proper explanation requires more than mere supervenience: it requires that the supervenience base provide a proper explanation of the supervenient truths. In the previous section, we argued that a proper explanation of the truth of *A* points, not to a property that Arnold now has, but rather to a property that he once had. If an explanation that points to a property that Arnold now has isn't proper, then neither is one that points to a property now had by eternal abstracta, or the world, or eternal atoms, or a haecceity. These

⁶ See Chisholm 1990: 553–554.

⁷ See Bigelow 1996.

⁸ See Keller 2004: 99–101.

⁹ See Keller 2004: 96–99. See also Lewis 2004: 8–11.

more sophisticated solutions thus also fail to provide a proper explanation of the truth of *A*.¹⁰

Perhaps one could become convinced—for reasons unrelated to the issues that are currently at hand—that individuals like Arnold are not metaphysically fundamental. One could become convinced, for example, that the metaphysically fundamental entities are eternal atoms. If this were the case, then perhaps the proper explanation of the truth of *A* would point, not to Arnold, but rather to some eternal atoms. Suppose so. Our basic point remains: the proper explanation of the truth of *A* should point to some properties that those eternal atoms once instantiated, not to whatever properties those eternal atoms now instantiate. Our point does not concern the implausibility of using ontological surrogates for non-existing past things; it instead concerns the implausibility of using ideological surrogates in place of explanations that point to properties that things once instantiated.

We can generalize. If the Truthmaking Problem for presentism is to find a way, as a presentist, to explain the truth of propositions about the past solely in terms of the properties that things presently have, and if we are right about what matters when it comes to explaining the truth of a proposition about the past—if we are right about what does and does not count as a proper explanation of *A*, for example—then there can be no satisfactory solution to the Truthmaking Problem for presentism. This result might prompt either of two reactions. The first is “So much the worse for presentism!” The second is “So much the worse for the view that truth must be explained by appealing to being!” We admit that the first reaction is more common, although we are not convinced that it is correct.

¹⁰ A less common solution to the ideological challenge appeals to a property more of a kind with *being pale*, the property *having intrinsic shape S* (presently instantiated by an extra entity, something over and above the things that presently exist). (See Monton and Kierland 2007.) But this solution succumbs to the present objection: if an explanation that points to a property that Arnold now has isn't proper, then neither is one that points to a property now had by some extra entity. Monton and Kierland (2007: 492) reply that, since “there is nothing more to” Arnold's once having the property *being pale* than the extra entity's now having intrinsic shape *S*, an explanation that points to that entity's now having that shape is proper. They call this extra entity ‘the past’ and say that it is “what *has* happened: what things existed and how they *were*” (2007: 491; emphases in original). But Monton and Kierland face a dilemma: either the extra entity, which they call ‘the past’, is really what happened, or it isn't. If it is, then it becomes implausible to claim, as they do (and, as presentists, must), that the extra entity is an aspect of the present; and, if it isn't, then Arnold's once having the property *being pale* isn't simply a matter of the extra entity's having intrinsic shape *S*. To make it plausible that what they call ‘the past’ is an aspect of the present, Monton and Kierland (2007: 496) distinguish what they call ‘the past’ from “that one big event [that] consists of all past events.” This suggests that what they call ‘the past’ isn't really what happened.

4. Abstract Times

But perhaps we have been too quick: perhaps presentists have a way out. For perhaps we have not thought carefully enough about what it is for Arnold to have once had the property *being pale*.¹¹

Some presentists appeal to abstract times in the same way that some actualists appeal to abstract worlds. Just as some actualists claim that worlds are actually existing abstract objects—for example, maximal, consistent sets of eternal propositions (i.e. propositions whose truth-values remain unchanged over time)—so too some presentists claim that times are presently existing abstract objects: for example, maximal, consistent sets of temporal propositions (i.e. propositions whose truth-values change over time).¹²

Abstract times, on this view, are presently existing abstract objects. One of these abstract times represents how things are, others represent how things were, and still others represent how things will be. To distinguish past, present, and future, we need to suppose that, unlike abstract worlds, abstract times stand in a linear order, one induced by a *being earlier than* (or a *being later than*) relation that holds between abstract times.

On this view, an abstract time, t_y , that represents how things were yesterday stands in the *being earlier than* relation to an abstract time, t_n , that represents how things are now. Supposing that Arnold was pale yesterday, t_y represents Arnold as having *being pale*: according to t_y , Arnold has *being pale*. And so we can explain the truth of A :

(ABSTRACT) The proposition that Arnold was pale is true because Arnold has *being pale* according to t_y , which bears the *being earlier than* relation to t_n .¹³

(ABSTRACT) appears to have much to commend it. First, (ABSTRACT) invokes only what presentists allow in their ontologies and ideologies: it invokes only presently existing entities and the properties and relations that they presently instantiate. Second, unlike (PRESENT)—the simple explanation discussed in Section

¹¹ Thanks to Tom Crisp for pressing us on this.

¹² The presentists in question include Crisp (2003, 2007), Davidson (2003, 2004), Markosian (2004: 75–79), and Bourne (2006a, 2006b). The actualists in question include Adams (1974), Plantinga (1976), and Stalnaker (1976).

¹³ See, in particular, Crisp 2007. A commitment to abstract times does not entail a commitment to (ABSTRACT), any more than a commitment to abstract possible worlds entails a commitment to the view that possibility is to be explained by appealing to possible worlds. See, for example, Plantinga 1976: 107. (The page numbers for Plantinga 1976 are from the reprint in Plantinga 2003.)

2—(ABSTRACT) doesn't invoke the present instantiation of the property *having been pale*. (In fact, the framework of abstract times provides a way to distinguish the present instantiation of *having been pale* from the past instantiation of *being pale*: the former is a matter of how things are according to t_n , whereas the latter is a matter of how things are according to some abstract time, such as t_y , that bears the *being earlier than* relation to t_n .) And, third, unlike the properties invoked by (PRESENT) or by the sophisticated explanations discussed in the previous section, the properties and relations invoked by (ABSTRACT) appear unobjectionable: neither the property *being pale* nor the relation *being earlier than* appears to be primitively "tensed" in the way that *having been pale* and its ilk are.

But, in the end, we don't think that (ABSTRACT) is a proper explanation either, for reasons that hinge upon the status of the *being earlier than* relation that holds between the abstract times. Why is it that t_y —an abstract time according to which Arnold has the property *being pale*—bears the *being earlier than* relation to t_n ? It seems to us that t_y bears the *being earlier than* relation to t_n because the latter represents how things are now, the former represents how things were yesterday, and yesterday was before today. If we ignore everything but Arnold, the intuition is this: the abstract time according to which Arnold instantiates the property *being pale* bears the *being earlier than* relation to the present abstract time because Arnold had the property *being pale* yesterday.

In the end, (ABSTRACT)—the explanation of the truth of A that appeals to t_y 's representing that Arnold is pale and to t_y 's bearing the *being earlier than* relation to t_n —is no better than (PRESENT), the explanation of the truth of A that appeals to Arnold's now having the property *having been pale*. Like (PRESENT), (ABSTRACT) might have some explanatory power, but whatever power it has is entirely due to its complicated connection to what a proper explanation of the truth of A points to: Arnold's once having the property *being pale*. The only reason that t_y 's representing that Arnold is pale and t_y 's bearing the *being earlier than* relation to t_n has any bearing at all on the truth of the proposition that Arnold was pale is that, if t_y represents that Arnold is pale and t_y bears the *being earlier than* relation to t_n , then Arnold once had the property *being pale*, and his once having that property is what a proper explanation of the truth of A points to. As with the present instantiation of *having been pale*, then, so with the present instantiation of the *being earlier than* relation: it is, at best, a symptom or trace of the real thing. The real thing is an explanation that appeals to properties Arnold once had, not to relations now instantiated by abstract times.

Those who endorse (ABSTRACT) recognize that some might be unwilling to take their *being earlier than* relation between abstract times as fundamental. In response, friends of (ABSTRACT) typically insist on two points: first, that it is a brute fact that certain abstract times stand in the *being earlier than* relation to other abstract times; and, second, that they are no worse off than eternalists who insist that it is a brute fact that certain concrete times stand in a (different) *being earlier than* relation to other concrete times.¹⁴ For example, Crisp (2007: 132) makes the first point when he says

it's a brute, contingent fact that the abstract times come temporally ordered as they do. Explanation has to come to an end somewhere, and it's not unreasonable to suppose that it bottoms out in the contingent fact that certain times are earlier than certain other times.

And Crisp (2007: 132) at least suggests the second point when he says

Note that similar questions arise for the eternalist who believes in concrete times. Why do the concrete times come temporally ordered in the way they do? What explains the fact that they have this order and not another? Eternalists have answered such questions in various ways, but as plausible an answer as any is that *they just do* come ordered this way, and there's an end 'ont. It's a brute, contingent fact, on this view, that concrete times come temporally ordered as they do. (emphases in original)

We agree that explanation has to come to an end somewhere, but we disagree with friends of (ABSTRACT) who insist that that it's just as plausible to suppose that there are brute facts about abstract times standing in one *being earlier than* relation as it is to suppose that there are brute facts about concrete times standing in another *being earlier than* relation. It isn't unreasonable to suppose that explanation bottoms out in the contingent fact that certain times are earlier than certain other times—provided that those times are *concrete*. We think that it becomes less reasonable to suppose that explanation bottoms out in the contingent fact that certain times are earlier than others when those times are *abstract*.

But our objection to (ABSTRACT) isn't simply that facts about abstract times standing in a *being earlier than* relation aren't brute or fundamental; rather, it's that such facts aren't what a proper explanation of the truth of the proposition that Arnold was pale points to. Even if facts about abstract times standing in a *being earlier than* relation were brute, we don't think that they would be *more* fundamental

¹⁴ See Bourne 2006: 19–20, Crisp 2007.

than facts about the properties that Arnold once instantiated; at best, we think, such facts would be *equally* fundamental: neither set of facts would obtain in virtue of the other. And, we think, a proper explanation of the truth of the proposition that Arnold was pale would still point to facts about properties he once instantiated, not to facts about abstract times standing in a *being earlier than* relation.

5. Tense

We insist on the explanatory priority of the past instantiation of a property (Arnold's once instantiating *being pale*) over the present instantiation of a tensed property (Arnold's now instantiating *having been pale*) and, further, over any other facts about how things presently are. But how do we understand our preferred explanans? What is it for Arnold to *once have had* a property?

Craig Bourne (2006a: 20) characterizes “Priorian Presentism” as the view that, among the present facts, there are unstructured tensed facts corresponding to sentences like ‘It was the case that Arnold is pale’. As Bourne understands the view, these present facts are presently existing constituents of the world. Such a view, it seems to us, falls prey to the same problems as all the rest: the world presently contains such facts precisely because Arnold once had the property *being pale*, not vice versa. So, however we are to understand Arnold's once having the property *being pale*, we don't think that it should be understood as the existence of an unstructured tensed fact.

David Lewis (1988: 188 n. 2) reports that, in conversation, Mark Hinchliff defended an “adverbialist” view, according to which “temporal modifiers introduce relations of things to properties.”¹⁵ So, for example, you *will be* straight just in case you bear some relation—Lewis (1988: 189 n. 2) describes it as a “modified-having” relation—to the property *being straight*. We might call this relation ‘the *going to instantiate* relation’. In the same vein, we can say that Arnold *was* pale just in case he bears a modified-having relation—call it ‘the *once having instantiated* relation’—to the property *being pale*.

But can we understand the claim that Arnold once had the property *being pale* as the claim that Arnold now bears the *once having instantiated* relation to *being pale*? We say no. As Lewis (1988: 189 n. 2) points out in objecting to the view, “the modified-having itself goes on in the present.” And, we say, what goes on in the present is at best a symptom of what went on in the past. Arnold now bears the *once having instantiated* relation to *being pale* because he *once bore* the simple

¹⁵ The page numbers for Lewis 1988 are from the reprint in Lewis 1999.

instantiating relation to *being pale*. The tense can no more be collapsed into a tensed relation between object and property than it can be collapsed into a tensed property.

In print, Hinchliff (1996: 125–127) defends an “adverbial approach” that is importantly different from the approach Lewis describes. Taking his cue from Prior, Hinchliff argues that temporal modification involves primitive sentential tense operators like ‘It was the case that’ and ‘It will be the case that’. The meaning of ‘it was the case that’ is given by the following rule: “‘It was the case that *S*’ is true if and only if it was the case that ‘*S*’ is true.”¹⁶ This seems close to the position we have in mind. ‘Arnold is pale’ is false, because Arnold does not instantiate the property *being pale*; but ‘Arnold is pale’ was true, because Arnold once instantiated the property *being pale*.

But the apparent close agreement might be merely verbal. Hinchliff (1996: 127) happily glosses his view as the view that a candle that was straight but is now bent “has the property of having been straight,” a gloss we must reject. Moreover, he agrees that all facts about the candle are “facts in the present moment” but insists that, “given presentism, facts in the present moment are also just plain facts.”¹⁷ If, by “facts,” he simply means “true propositions,” then we can agree; but if he means to say that the truth of a proposition like *A*, the proposition that Arnold was pale, is to be explained by pointing to some presently existing facts in the world, we must disagree.

6. Hypotheticality

Sider objects to views that take “tensed” properties like *having been pale* as fundamental on the grounds that such properties are objectionably “hypothetical,” in that they “‘point beyond’ their instances.”¹⁸ We object to such views on the grounds that the instantiation of such properties does not figure in a proper explanation of the truth of propositions about the past. These are not the same objection.

The modal property *possibly being president* is also supposed to be objectionably hypothetical, as is the dispositional property *being fragile*.¹⁹ The hypotheticality objection, therefore, cuts with equal force across both the modal and temporal cases.

Our objection, by contrast, rests on intuitions about what is fundamental, when it comes to explaining the truth of propositions about

¹⁶ Hinchliff 1996: 126.

¹⁷ Hinchliff 1996: 127.

¹⁸ See Sider 2001: 41. For further discussion of this objection, see Crisp 2007.

¹⁹ See Sider 2001: 41.

the past. And it seems to us that there is room for our intuitions about propositions about the past to come apart, on this point, from our intuitions about modal propositions.

As actualists, we think that there is something appealing to the view that the fundamental modal facts concern the actual instantiation of modal properties. Consider the proposition—call it ‘*P*’—that Arnold could be president. Does a proper explanation of the truth of *P* point to Arnold’s instantiation of the property *possibly being president*, or does it point to his possible instantiation of the property *being president*? Which is more fundamental? Is the modal property that Arnold has a mere symptom of his possibly having the non-modal property? Or do we intend, when we talk about the ways Arnold could be, to be describing his actual modal properties? We have no strong intuitions one way or the other about this case: we are willing to entertain an actualist metaphysic that treats “hypothetical” modal properties as fundamental.

What, then, is the difference between the modal and temporal cases? There is a natural and plausible conception of modal reality that treats the actual as fundamental and understands modality in terms of the actual modal properties of actual things or, perhaps, the actual powers and dispositions of actual things. There is no natural and plausible analogy when it comes to the past, because—to fall into a metaphor—the past, having happened, is able to assert its independence from the present in a way that the merely possible is not able to assert its independence from the actual.²⁰

How, then, can we recognize the independence of the past while remaining presentists? As we have insisted, we must accept that the explanation of the truth of *A* points to properties Arnold once had. This does not commit us to objectionably hypothetical *entities*: neither Arnold nor the property *being pale* is objectionably hypothetical. But it does commit us to a kind of irreducibly hypothetical explanation, an explanation that “points beyond” what there is and what properties and relations things instantiate. How should this sort of explanation be understood?

What we are led to, it seems to us, is a better way of understanding the presentist’s commitment to “primitive tense.” The commitment is not to primitive tensed properties like *having been pale*. Nor is it a commitment to primitive tensed facts, like *Arnold’s having been pale*, understood as additional “hypothetical” constituents of present reality. Primitive tensed talk does not correspond to—it is not in the business

²⁰ Contrary to Rea (2003: 262–263), Markosian (2004: 60–62), and Keller (2004: 102), we thus see a disanalogy between the modal and temporal cases here.

of corresponding to—primitive “tensed” bits of present reality. Instead, we must see this commitment as a commitment to the primitive use of tense in the explanation of present truth: *A* is true because Arnold *once* instantiated the property *being pale*. This explanation does not point to what there is or how things are. It “points beyond” reality, to describe how things once were and, in particular, to describe a property Arnold once instantiated.

It seems to us, then, that the metaphysics of the past provides us with strong motivation to reject the demand that truth be explained by pointing to what there is and how things are. When explaining the truth of a proposition about how things were, one needs to appeal, not to how things are, but rather to how things once were. This sounds rather obvious, to put it mildly, which makes it all the more confounding to us that so many presentists have gone to such lengths to deny it. We suggest that this obvious fact is not something that presentists can, or should, deny.

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