

ONCE PRESENT, NOW PAST

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ABSTRACT. Those of us who think that some of the fundamental facts that constitute reality are temporary, and so subject to change, must account for a corresponding contrast between past and present. That contrast cannot be captured by pointing to the facts that constitute reality; it requires us to point to the facts that once constituted reality too. So, if the fundamental facts are temporary, then the past is explanatorily ineliminable, but it is not real. This gives us a reason to be Presentists rather than Moving Spotlight Theorists or Growing Block Theorists, and it gives us a reason, as Presentists, to reject the demand that truth be grounded in being.

1. INTRODUCTION

Just as most of us think that some of the fundamental facts—the facts that constitute reality—are contingent, some of us think that some of the fundamental facts—the facts that constitute reality—are temporary. We call ourselves “Tensers” or “A-theorists”, or we say that, on our view, reality is “dynamic” rather than “static”.

If a fundamental fact is temporary, then it now constitutes reality, but it has not always done so. This involves a contrast: a contrast between reality as it is, and reality as it was, between what is real, and what was real, between present and past. This paper is about how to understand that contrast. My basic claim is that the contrast cannot be grounded in reality, but must instead point beyond reality, to a past that was once real, but no longer is. The past, in other words, has ineliminable explanatory work to do, work that it can do only if it is not real.

This is all rather abstract. The point becomes clear, I think, when we see how it applies to particular views. So I consider three views in turn, each of which assumes that some of the fundamental facts are temporary facts: the Moving Spotlight, the Growing Block, and Presentism. I argue that, in each case, we are driven to point beyond reality, if we want to have an adequate account of the past. I then discuss some consequences of this for our understanding of tense.

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This is an old paper, based upon ideas first developed in my dissertation. It served as my job talk in Fall 2004. It then went through several revisions and rejections, and I eventually put it aside. I have gone through the paper and revised it, and added some references to the more recent literature, but I have not been able to thoroughly engage with all of that literature. Suggestions along those lines are very welcome indeed. This paper grew out of my dissertation, and owes a great debt to my advisor, Calvin Normore, and my committee, David Kaplan, Terry Parsons, and Philippe Schlenker. It also owes a great deal to lots of other people—Ben Caplan, chief among them—who I will duly acknowledge should it ever get published.

2. HOW DOES YOUR SPOTLIGHT MOVE?

According to the *Moving Spotlight Theory*, reality consists in a fixed series of events, ordered from earlier to later. But these events are subject to one sort of fundamental change: as time passes, each event changes from being future, to being present, to being past. Here is McTaggart’s famous description of the view:

Take any event—the death of Queen Anne, for example—and consider what changes can take place in its characteristics. That it is a death, that it is the death of Anne Stuart, that it has such causes, that it has such effects—every characteristic of this sort never changes. “Before the stars saw one another plain,” the event in question was the death of a Queen. And in every respect but one, it is equally devoid of change. But in one respect it does change. It was once an event in the far future. It became every moment an event in the nearer future. At last it was present. Then it became past, and will always remain past, though every moment it becomes further and further past. (McTaggart, 1927, p. 13)

So if we took a snapshot of reality, as it is right now, according to this theory, we might see something like Figure 1: a series of events, E_n , ordered by the *earlier to later* relation (here represented by the ‘ \rightarrow ’); one event, E_0 , has the special property, *being present*. (Obviously this is oversimplified: we need not suppose that events are discrete or momentary, or that there is a single event at each moment. But these complications will not be relevant to what I have to say.)

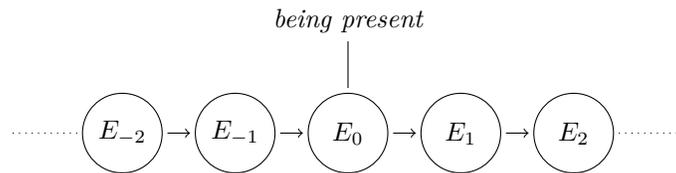


FIGURE 1. Snapshot, *Moving Spotlight Theory*, when E_0 is present.

And suppose that, having waited a moment, we take a second snapshot of reality, as it is right now, according to this theory. It might look something like Figure 2: the underlying series of events remains the same, but now E_1 has the property *being present* instead of E_0 , because the “spotlight” has moved from E_0 to E_1 .

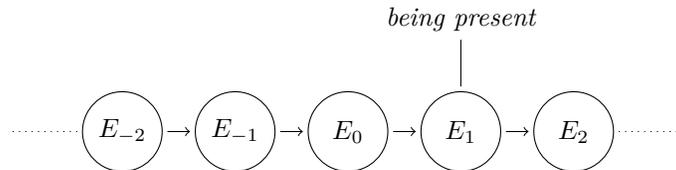


FIGURE 2. Snapshot, *Moving Spotlight Theory*, when E_1 is present.

To be clear, for the Moving Spotlight Theorist, Figure 1 and Figure 2 are not two different pictures of the same underlying reality, seen from two different perspectives. As representations of how things are, they contradict each other. According to (1), E_0 has the property *being present* and E_1 does not. According to (2), E_1 has the property *being present* and E_0 does not. So they cannot both be accurate—at least not together.¹ Instead, only one of them, (2) represents how things are. (1) was once accurate—it once represented how things were—but is no longer accurate.

It is perhaps tempting to suppose that the true structure of reality, according to the Moving Spotlight Theorist, would be best represented as a series of snapshots, each representing the whole of reality as it was at a given moment. And that might tempt you to posit a metaphysically real *hypertime*, a time within which ordinary time flows. But this temptation must be resisted. For some purposes, it might be useful to model the Moving Spotlight Theory by using a series of snapshots. But this model is, in one important respect, not true to the phenomenon it is meant to model: the snapshots all coexist in a series in a way that the differences that they represent never do. A more faithful model would be a model that itself changes. The use of concrete models with temporary features, that undergo change, is familiar enough from engineering, and I see no reason why we could not, if we wished, represent the Moving Spotlight Theory by using such a model.

E_0 is past. But there are two ways we might think about what this comes to, given the theory. On the one hand, if we look at (2), we can note that E_0 stands in the *earlier than* relation to E_1 , which has the property *being present*. If something is earlier than something that is present, then it is past. So E_0 is past.

On the other hand, we might look at the contrast between (1) and (2), and note that E_0 once had the property *being present*, but no longer does. If something was present, but no longer is, then it is past. So E_0 is past.

So, generalizing a bit, here are two accounts of what it is for an event to be past, given the Moving Spotlight Theory:

Now-Past: An event is *now-past* just in case it is earlier than an event that has the property *being present*.

Once-Present: An event is *once-present* just in case it once had the property *being present*.

Once this distinction is made, it seems to me pretty clear that the once-present is the right way to think about the past, and the now-past is, at best, a symptom or trace of what happened, which can only be understood properly in reference to the once-present. One way to bring this out is to consider what happens when the once-present and the now-past come apart.

Suppose, for example, that the property *being present*, as it sweeps down the series of events, occasionally skips over an event. Then there will be events in the series that are now-past, but were never present. Call someone who thinks this happens a *Skipping Spotlight Theorist*.

¹For development of a view that allows that the facts represented by both snapshots can, in some sense, obtain together, see Fine (2005).

Now consider a dispute. Suppose a Moving Spotlight Theorist and Skipping Spotlight Theorist disagree about whether E_0 was ever present. They agree about how things are now: both take Figure 2 to be an accurate portrayal of what there is and how things are. But they disagree about how things were: the Moving Spotlight Theorist thinks that Figure 1 was *once* an accurate portrayal of how things were; the Skipping Spotlight Theorist thinks it never was.

I don't know of any Skipping Spotlight Theorists, but I still think that Moving Spotlight Theorists need to be able to say how they differ from Skipping Spotlight Theorists. And it seems to me that what they need to say is that, by their lights, the once-present and the now-past cannot come apart: events that are now earlier than the present must once have been present themselves.

Perhaps they will want to say that this is built-in to the *earlier to later* relation that orders the events. One might say that it is the very nature of the *earlier to later* relation to be *induced* by the movement of the property *being present* from event to event.² An event that never gets to have the property, then, has thereby been left out of the series, just as a child whose head is not even tapped in a game of duck-duck-goose has been left out of the game.³

But if this is so—if *being earlier than* something present essentially involves once being present—then we cannot see, just by looking at the structure displayed in Figure 2, whether or not E_0 is really past: we need to know whether or not the relation ordering the events in that structure really is an *earlier to later* relation, and we can only know that, it seems, by considering how things have changed, from snapshot to snapshot, and, in particular, whether or not E_0 ever had the property *being present*.

It is easy to multiply examples in this vein, all of which suggest that the once-present has an ineliminable role to play in a full accounting of the movement of presentness from one moment to the next.

For example, just as we might imagine that the now occasionally skips an event, we might imagine that occasionally, an event in the series ceases to exist. So we might move from a snapshot that looks like Figure 1, to a snapshot that looks like Figure 3. That is, we might move from a situation in which E_0 is present to a situation where E_1 is present, but E_0 no longer exists, and so does not stand in the *earlier than* relation to E_1 . So is E_0 past or not? If being past is a matter of having been present, than it is; but if being past is a matter of being earlier than what is present, than it is not.⁴o

Or consider the (slightly heterodox) Young Earth Creationist who admits the existence of the Big Bang, and admits that it happened earlier than 6000 years ago,

²See Broad (1923, p. 81-82).

³This is similar in spirit to McTaggart's criticism of Russell (1927, p. 14). For Russell, events are ordered from earlier to later but there is no moving property, *being present*. McTaggart complains that no series can be a temporal series if there is no real change, and so suggests that the ordering relation, for Russell, cannot be a temporal relation, like *earlier to later*. Here, the Moving Now Theorist need not make such sweeping claims. All she needs is the claim that the relation she calls 'earlier to later', in the context of her own views about reality, is essentially tied to the movement of the now.

⁴I am told that Hud Hudson defends a view of this sort in his new book, *The Fall and Hypertime*, but I have not yet had a chance to look at this.

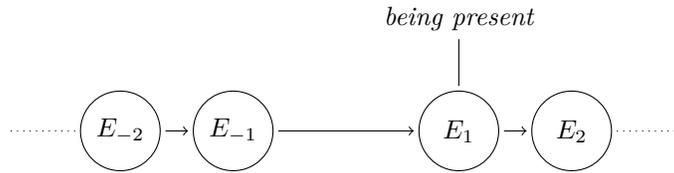


FIGURE 3. Snapshot, *Moving Spotlight with Event Annihilation*, when E_1 is present and E_0 has been annihilated.

but claims that it never had the property *being present*, because the journey of the Moving Spotlight only began 6000 years ago: that is, events earlier than 6000 years ago exist, but never had the property *being present*.

These views all involve a certain kind of deviance. In each case, current facts that one might have taken to record past events—the current set of relations among existing events, say—fail to do so. The Moving Now Theorist might assert that, on her view, the current facts are in fact an accurate record. But this requires that she draw a connection between those current facts and facts that are no longer current, between facts that presently constitute reality—the facts displayed in the current snapshot—and facts that once constituted reality but no longer do. So it is in this sense, then, that the once-present is explanatorily ineliminable. This is what I have in mind when I say that the past has an ineliminable explanatory role to play, and that it is a role it can only play if it is no longer real.

One last case. Suppose one particular event— E_0 , say—has a property that no other events have. And suppose it has this property permanently, not temporarily. Call this property *being frozent*. Then if you take a snapshot, it will look like Figure 4. This looks the same as Figure 1, which represents E_0 as having the property *being present*.

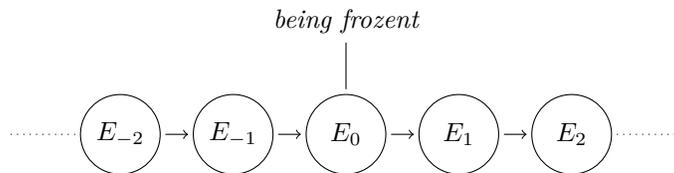


FIGURE 4. Snapshot, *Frozen Spotlight Theory*, when E_0 is frozent.

What does the Moving Spotlight Theorist need to say to distinguish herself from this Frozen Spotlight Theory?

She might claim that *being present*, unlike *being frozent*, cannot be instantiated permanently. But it is not obvious that this is so.⁵ McTaggart (1909) argues that the last moment of time, once it became present, would remain permanently present, because, being last, it would never become past. By similar reasoning—not endorsed by McTaggart—one could argue that the first moment of time, if there were one, was present but could never become present, because it was never

⁵The specter of a frozen present is raised, but not addressed, in Markosian (1993, p. 835). Sider (2001, p. 22) raises an analogous worry for the Growing Block Theorist.

future. Putting these two points together, we reach the conclusion that, if there were only a single moment of time, and if it were present, it would be permanently present. Some theists think that this is a good way to understand divine eternity: permanent unbounded presentness.

But let us grant that *being present*, by its very nature, is a property that cannot be permanently instantiated. That gets us a real difference between Figure 1 and Figure 4, and so between the Moving Spotlight Theory and the Frozen Spotlight Theory.

If this is so—if *being present* is something essentially temporary, then we cannot see, just by looking at the structure displayed in Figure 1, that E_0 is really present: we need to know whether or not it once lacked the property it now has, or will later lack the property it soon has. So again we find ourselves comparing the facts that constitute reality with the facts that once constituted (or will constitute) reality.

The Moving Spotlight Theorist, then, appears to have two ways of thinking about the past. The first—the now-past—appears to understand the past in terms of what there is and how things are; the second—the once-present—instead involves a contrast between what there is and how things are, and what there was or how things were. But it seems to me that she cannot make do with the now-past alone, if she wants to do justice to her own view, and distinguish her view from deviant views, like the Skipping Spotlight Theory or the Frozen Spotlight Theory. To characterize her view properly, she must either understand the now-past in terms of the once-present, or, perhaps, simply appeal to the once-present directly.

3. WAS EVERY HAS-BEEN ONCE THE LATEST THING?

The same point applies to the *Growing Block Theory*.⁶ Growing Block Theorists* think that, as time passes, new things and new events come to be, but old things and old events never cease to be.⁷ The universe, they say, has the structure of a four-dimensional spacetime, consisting of all past and present things and events, but no future things or events. There is no fundamental property, *being present*, on this view. Instead, to be present is to be among the most recent things or events to have come to be, to sit on the top of the block, so to speak, at the cutting edge of reality, to be such that nothing is later than you.

So if we take a snapshot of reality, as it is right now, according to this theory, it might look something like Figure 5. And if we wait for a moment, and take a second snapshot of reality, it might look something like Figure 6.

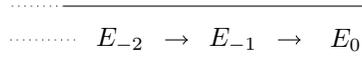


FIGURE 5. Snapshot, *Growing Block Theory*, when E_0 is present.

⁶For arguments against the Growing Block Theory that are in a similar vein to the arguments I have just presented, see Sider (2001, p. 22), Braddon-Mitchell (2004), Heathwood (2005), Merricks (2006).

⁷See, for example, Broad (1923, p. 69), Tooley (1997).

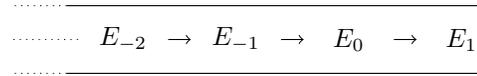


FIGURE 6. Snapshot, *Growing Block Theory*, when E_1 is present.

Just as the Moving Spotlight Theory offers us two ways of thinking about the past, so does the Growing Block Theory. On the one hand, E_0 is past because it is earlier than something else, and anything that is earlier than something else is, according to the theory, therefore past. On the other hand, E_0 is past because it was once present—that is, it was once such that nothing was later than it. As before, the first way of thinking about the past concerns the facts that now constitute reality—the facts represented in Figure 6. The second way instead involves the contrast between the facts that now constitute reality and the facts that once did.

So, generalizing a bit, here are two accounts of what it is for an event to be past, given the Growing Block Theory:

Now-Past: An event is *now-past* just in case it is earlier than some event.

Once-Present: An event is *once-present* just in case it was once such that no event was later than it.

Again, it seems to me that, once this distinction is made, it is pretty clear that, when it comes to being past, the once-present is fundamentally what matters, and the now-past is, at best, a symptom or trace of it. Again, we can bring this out by considering what happens when the two come apart.

So, for example, we can imagine someone who holds that there are things or events earlier in the block that were never present. Maybe the block extends back 13.8 billion years, but only started growing 6000 years ago. Maybe occasionally some new event comes into existence but gets added not to the forward edge of the block, but somewhere further back.

Such views are in complete agreement with the Growing Block Theory, when it comes to facts about what there is and how things are related. The current facts—the facts that now constitute reality—are the same on either view. If we only consider the now-past, the past as it is recorded in the current facts, then we will find no difference. But for the Growing Block Theorist, the now-past is meant to be an accurate record of what actually happened. If E_0 exists down in the block, earlier than E_1 , then that is because E_0 was once at the top of the block: it now past *because* it was once present.

We can also imagine someone who holds that there are things that were once present, but are no longer part of the block. Perhaps they think that the occasional event—your fifth birthday party, say—gets annihilated, several years after it happened. Or perhaps they think that every event gets annihilated 1000 years after it first came to be, so that reality is a block of fixed size, constantly gaining new stuff at one end while it loses old stuff at the other end.

Such views disagree with the Growing Block Theory, when it comes to facts about what there is and how things are related. But if we just consider what each view says, at any given moment, about what is present, then the views are in complete

agreement. That is, they agree on the once-present, even while they disagree about the now-past.

So, again, there are two morals I want to draw. First, the Growing Block Theorist cannot distinguish herself from these deviant characters by appealing to some disagreement about the facts that currently constitute reality, and so to some disagreement about the now-past. Instead, she must appeal to a difference in what once was present. But second, and more fundamentally, what really matters is what once was present. If we both agree that once, your fifth grade birthday party existed, and was present—nothing was later than it—but we disagree about whether or not it still exists, and stands in the relation *being earlier than* to some other event, then, in the important sense of “what happened”, we disagree about whether or not reality retains an accurate record of what happened, but we don’t disagree about what happened.

4. PRESENTISM AND THE PAST

A lot has been written about how Presentists might go about trying to ground the truth of propositions about the past in facts about the present.⁸ But for the same reason that Moving Spotlight Theorists and Growing Block Theorists cannot give a full account of their views by appealing to the now-past, Presentists cannot give a full account of their views if everything they say is grounded in facts about the present.

Suppose that in 2006, we had taken a snapshot of reality, as it is according to the Presentist. Then, focusing in just on the likely Presidents of the United States, we would have seen something like Figure 7: George W. Bush has the property, *being President*, and Al Gore and Barack Obama do not.

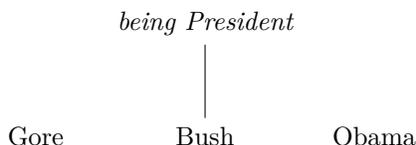
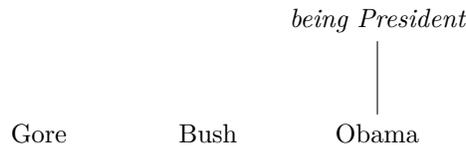


FIGURE 7. Snapshot, *Presentism*, circa 2006.

And suppose we take a snapshot now, in 2015, again just focusing on Bush, Gore, and Obama, and who is and who isn’t the current President. Then it would look something like Figure 8: Obama is President; Bush and Gore are not.

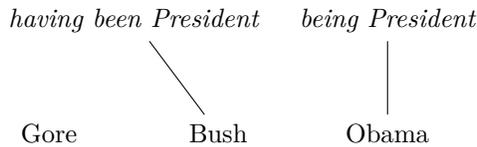
When we considered the Moving Now Theory and the Growing Block Theory, there were obvious materials within the current snapshot in terms of which we could construct an account of the past in terms of what I called the now-past. Presentist snapshots appear to be impoverished, in that they do not offer any such materials: nothing in Figure 8, for example, indicates that Bush was once President, or that Gore never was President.

⁸See Bigelow (1996), Keller (2004), Crisp (2007), Merricks (2007), Sanson and Caplan (2010), Cameron (2010), Caplan and Sanson (2011), for some examples.

FIGURE 8. Snapshot, *Presentism*, circa 2015.

This corresponds directly to the so-called *Truthmaking Problem* for Presentism. According to Presentism, reality is limited to the present: what there is is what there presently is; how things are is how they presently are. But, according to the Truthmaker Principle, truth supervenes on being, so any possible expressible difference must be reflected in some difference in what there is or how things are. But, as we see here, the difference between Gore and Bush—that Bush once was, but Gore has never been, President—does not correspond to any present difference.⁹

The classic Presentist response to this problem is to inflate the present: add features to present reality that suffice to capture the difference between Bush and Gore. One way to do this invokes the “past-tensed” or “past-oriented” property, *having been President*. Once we add this property to our ideological inventory, Figure 8 is incomplete. A more complete snapshot would look like Figure 9, which captures the difference between Bush, who once was President, and Gore, who never was.

FIGURE 9. Snapshot, *Presentism with Past-Oriented Properties*, circa 2015.

With this enriched ideology, we can once again introduce two ways of thinking about the past, one a matter of the facts that currently constitute reality, the other a matter of the facts that once constituted reality. To say that Bush was President, in the “now-past” sense, is to say that Bush instantiates the past-oriented property, *having been President*. And to say that Bush was President, in the “once-present” sense, is to say that Bush once instantiated the (ordinary, present-oriented) property, *being President*.

But all the reasons we had for thinking that a Moving Now Theorist or a Growing Block Theorist must appeal to the once-present, and cannot simply appeal to the now-past, apply here as well, because we can imagine someone who thinks that the past-oriented properties that objects have come apart from the present-oriented properties they once had.

Imagine someone who agrees with us that Bush has the property, *having been President*, but who thinks that Figure 7 was not accurate when it was taken. Instead,

⁹For an overview of this problem and possible Presentist responses, see Caplan and Sanson (2011).

they offer up the snapshot they took, back in 2006, which shows that Gore is President instead of Bush. To be sure, this is an odd view. The suggestion seems to be that Bush gained the property *having been President* after the fact, in some nefarious way, even though, he never had the property *being President*.

The oddity here is much like the oddity in supposing that one event is earlier than a present event, even though it never had the property *being present*. Recall that it seemed reasonable for the Moving Spotlight Theorist to say that it is built into the relation, *being earlier than*, that no event can be earlier than the present event unless it once had the property *being present*. In much the same way, it seems reasonable for the Presentist to say that it is built into the past-oriented property, *having been President*, that nothing can have it unless it once had the property, *being President*.

But notice what this means. It means that, when we build past-oriented properties into ideology, we are building in properties that essentially point beyond their instances. And it means that our account of the past, in terms of the now-past—in terms of the properties things now have—is explanatorily parasitic upon an account in terms of the once-present.

5. THE UNREALITY OF THE PAST

At one point, Prior says,

The present simply *is* the real considered in relation to two particular species of unreality, namely the past and the future (Prior, 1970, p. 245).

So far, I have been arguing for the explanatory priority of the once-present, that what matters, when we are thinking about the past, is not how things *are* but how they *were*. And I've tried to argue that this holds true even for those who, like the Moving Spotlight Theorist or the Growing Block Theorist, think that past things and events remain in existence.

But when we explain what happened in terms of the once-present, our explanation is one that points beyond reality. For example, the difference between Bush and Gore does not show up in Figure 8. Instead, the difference shows up only in 7, but 7 represents how reality once was, not how reality is. Even if we posit some difference that *does* show up in reality—by positing past-oriented properties, or by supposing that past things and events remain in existence—that difference ends up being explanatorily parasitic upon the prior difference, which does not show up in reality.

Many philosophers think that explanations that point beyond reality are bankrupt; that those of us who provide such explanations are cheaters that need to be caught and exposed.¹⁰ But it seems to me that anyone who thinks that the basic metaphysical facts that constitute reality change must give such explanations. And that seems to be a commitment common to all “A-theoretic” or “Tensed” theories, and

¹⁰The phrase “point beyond their instances” is borrowed from Sider, who claims that past-oriented properties are an “ontological cheat” because they “point beyond” their instances (2001, p. 41).

so it is a cost that we Presentists, Growing Block Theorists, and Moving Spotlight Theorists all must pay.

Once we decide to embrace this commitment, the idea that past events or things remain in existence after they have become past seems explanatorily redundant. So I think we have good reason to be Presentists rather than Moving Spotlight Theorists or Growing Block Theorists, and, as Presentists, we have good reason to reject the ideology of past-oriented properties.

Still, we need a way to express ourselves when we make claims about the past. How should we do so? Throughout the paper, I have been using verbal tense to mark the difference between the now-past and the once-present. For example, when discussing Figures 7 and 9, I in effect drew a distinction between the claim that,

1. Bush has the property *having been President*,

and

2. Bush *had* the property *being President*.

And I took (1) to be the fact represented in Figure 9, while I took (2) to be true because things once were as Figure 7 represents them to be.

I think this is a natural way to mark the difference. It is natural to take (2) as a claim not about current reality, as represented by a current snapshot, but as a claim about past reality, as represented by a past snapshot. And it is natural to take (1) as a claim not about past reality, but present reality, an attribution to Bush of a property he now has. But I don't think anything about the form of language used *forces* either interpretation. Technical issues aside, there is no obvious reason why one could not analyze the verbal tense in (2) in terms of some sort of predicate modifier, like the *having been* found in (1), or vice versa. The distinction I am drawing between the once-present and the now-past is a metaphysical distinction, and it is not obvious that it should map on to any particular proposal about how we ought to talk about the past.

We can see this point by considering two different metaphysical interpretations of a Priorian past-tense operator. According to Prior, the primitive idiom for expressing claims about the past is a sentential operator, **P**, equivalent to 'it was the case that'. So, for example, 'Bush was President' is represented as

3. **P**(Bush is President)

Prior himself does not say a great deal about the proper metaphysical interpretation of this past-tense operator. He asserts that it should not be taken as a device for making a claim *about* the embedded sentence, 'Bush is President', or *about* the proposition expressed by that sentence (Prior, 1968, p. 15). So it is not meant to be metalinguistic or metasemantic. He suggests that the use of tense operators

embodies the truth behind Augustine's suggestion of the 'secret place' where past and future times 'are', and his insistence that, where they are, they are not there as past or future but as present. The past is not the present, but it *is* the past present, and the

future is not the present, but it *is* the future present (Prior, 1968, p. 13).

Elsewhere, he characterizes the use of the past tense operator as providing for

the representation of past-tense facts as the former being-the-case of the present tense ones (Prior, 1968, p. 24).

This is all, I think, quite suggestive, and on my preferred interpretation of Prior, the past-tense operator is precisely meant to be a device for expressing the once-present, in my sense.

But the dominant interpretation seems to take a different direction. Tooley (1997, p. 238) takes Prior to have endorsed the view that “statements about the past could be analyzed in terms of statements about the present,” so that “the statement that there were dinosaurs could be true now, for then its truth-maker could consist, not of some past state of affairs, but rather, of present-tense states of affairs.” And he goes on to discuss a view, which he calls *Tensed-Facts Presentism*, according to which the present is in part constituted by brute “past-tensed states of affairs”. And Bourne (2007, p. 41-46) sees in Prior an attempt to reduce all past-tensed propositions to present-tensed propositions, though he stops short of attributing to Prior a parallel metaphysical reduction of the past to the present.

If we follow this line, we posit past-tensed facts among the facts that constitute reality. And so the present is constituted not just by the fact that Obama is President, but by the fact that Bush was President. And this is yet another way of trying to build the past into the present—yet another way of constructing an account of the past in terms of the now-past. All of the same problems will arise as arose for the other views we have already considered.

Imagine that we take a snapshot now, and one of the facts represented in that snapshot is

Obama is sitting.

And now imagine that Obama stands up, and we take another snapshot, only to discover that, according to it,

It is not the case that it was the case that Obama is sitting.

This can't be right: something has gone haywire. But to express her outrage at this situation, the Tensed-Facts Presentist must give herself some means of pointing “beyond” the facts represented in the second snapshot. But on her own account, tense operators don't do that. She could introduce some *other* idiom that allowed her to do that—an extra set of tense operators?—but then she will have undercut the very motivation for her view.

So we have two metaphysical interpretations of the Priorian tense operator, **P**. On the first interpretation, which I prefer, it is a device for making claims about the once-present. Can we say anything more about that interpretation?

Those of us who believe that reality is constituted by contingent facts are driven to introduce modal idioms adequate to express that contingency. In the same way,

those of us who believe that reality is constituted by temporary facts are driven to introduce tensed idioms to express that temporariness. If the idiom we choose is a tense operator, and we are then pressed to explain the metaphysical import of that operator, it seems to me that we should say that the proper metaphysical interpretation of our operator is the interpretation that flows from the metaphysical commitments that drove us to use it.

What is that pressure? We notice some fact, but then that fact slips away, pulling the metaphysical rug out from underneath us. So we switch from talking in the present-tense mode—about what is the case—to talking in the past-tense mode—about what was the case. But to make this switch just is to give ourselves the license—and seize for ourselves the means—to express the pastness of past facts in a way that respects their unreality.

As we've seen, this pastness cannot lie in some further fact about the present—or, indeed, in any further facts at all. In giving ourselves the license and means to express this pastness, we have given ourselves the license and means to express a proposition whose truth cannot be grounded in reality as it is, because it is instead a proposition whose truth depends on how reality once was.

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