

Presentism without Presentness

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We argue that presentism, understood as a view about time and existence, can perspicuously be defined in opposition to all other familiar contenders without appeal to any notion of presentness or cognate notions such as concreteness. Given recent worries about the suitability of such notions to cut much metaphysical ice, this should be welcomed by presentism's defenders. We also show that, irrespective of its sparse ideology, the proposed formulation forestalls any deviant interpretation at odds with the view it aims to capture.

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1

We do not know who first started the rumour, but it is frequently said that presentism—somewhat carelessly cast as the thesis that everything is present—is either trivially true or clearly false, depending on how the quantifier 'everything' is being understood. Thus it is contended that if 'everything' here means the same as 'everything present', presentism is trivially true, whereas if 'everything' here means the same as 'everything past, present or future', presentism is clearly false.¹

On the face of it, 'everything' simply means *everything* and does not mean anything else. Yet, it is a familiar phenomenon that uses of 'everything' are subject to implicit, contextually determined scope restrictions; and this may be so even in contexts in which one discusses ontology. There is no evident reason to believe, however, that presentists are unaware of the phenomenon. More specifically, there is no evident reason to believe that presentists are unaware of any implicit, contextually determined scope restriction that would trivialise their thesis. Yet, if they were aware of any such restriction in a given context, they would hardly, in that context, put forth their claim as a debatable thesis in need of defence. Presentists may be mistaken, but they are not that foolish.

Let us accordingly suppose, for the sake of argument at least, that in the particular context at hand, presentists use 'everything' to mean *everything past, present or future*. It does not follow that in asserting 'Everything is present', they thereby say something that is clearly false. To say that every black or non-black raven is black is a perfectly sound way of saying that the only ravens that exist are black—and this would remain to be so even if, throughout, we replaced 'black' and 'non-black' by 'partially black' and 'partially

non-black' respectively. Similarly, to say that everything that is past, present or future is present is a perfectly sound way of saying that the only things in time that exist are present—and this will remain to be so even if it is assumed that what is present may also be past or future. Of course, once it is conceded that there are dinosaurs, that thesis must be considered falsified, just as 'Every black or non-black raven is black' will count as false if there are uniformly white ravens. Hence all the burden is on the claim that there are such things as dinosaurs; and every presentist in their right mind will deny this sort of claim. What they will be happy to accept, by contrast, is that in the past, there were dinosaurs. But they will hasten to add that this in no way implies that there are dinosaurs or that there are things that, in the past, were dinosaurs. (For more on this diagnosis, see Crisp 2004.)

The second horn of the alleged dilemma is sometimes put in terms of an *eternalist quantifier*, as if such a thing existed. It is then argued that, accordingly understood, 'Everything is present' is clearly false because the eternalist quantifier also ranges over dinosaurs. We may cast this line of thought as follows: 'Insofar as it is uncontroversial that in the past there were dinosaurs, the eternalist quantifier will range over dinosaurs. And insofar as it is uncontroversial that no dinosaurs are present, "Everything is present" will accordingly come out false once "everything" is taken to express that eternalist quantifier.'

However, if there are no dinosaurs because everything is present and no dinosaurs are, then not even an eternalist quantifier manages to range over dinosaurs. We hear it being replied that any way of saying something true by saying that there are no dinosaurs for these kinds of reasons must deploy a *presentist quantifier* (as if such a thing existed), and that this takes us right back to the first horn. Once 'everything', as used by the presentist, is understood to mean the same as 'everything present', and 'nothing', as thus used, is correspondingly understood to mean the same as 'nothing present', then clearly and unspectacularly, nothing is a dinosaur in this sense of 'nothing'.

This reply is as good as saying that it is trivial that no raven is uniformly white if by 'no raven' we mean the same as 'no black raven'. Of course, this is *not* what we mean by 'no raven' when we assert 'No raven is uniformly white'. Why on earth should the presentist feel any corresponding pressure to concede that what she really means to be saying when asserting 'Everything is present' is that everything present is present? We know of no remotely plausible argument to this effect. If her assertion is nonetheless deemed false once her use of 'everything' is taken to mean something less restrictive, then this requires argument. It anyway will not do to simply insist that if 'everything' does not mean the same as 'everything present', there will be dinosaurs for it to range over.

One mistaken assumption here is that there are different quantifiers to choose from in order to interpret the claim 'Everything is present'. There is only one candidate quantifier to properly interpret the presentist's use of 'everything', and that is the quantifier we all express whenever we use 'everything', with or without explicit or contextually determined scope restriction. Presentists, eternalists and proponents of the Growing Block Theory alike use the very same quantifier with exactly the same intended meaning and in the very same context, and yet make conflicting claims about its range. This is by far more fruitful a rendition of the debate than any interpretation

that posits unwanted and unwarranted ambiguities or contextual variations that make its participants enunciate trivialities. Far from being charitable, any such interpretation makes those engaged in the debate look like fools. And one cannot stipulate things into existence by one's conceptual choices either.²

2

Now in fact, presentists are unlikely to commit to the unqualified claim that everything is present. For, what about abstract objects like numbers? Are presentists *qua* presentists committed to denying that there are any abstract objects? Hardly. But then, if they were to say that everything—the number 453 included—is present, what conception of being present would they presuppose? If abstract objects exist, they presently exist, since in general, if ϕ then presently ϕ . By contrast, abstract objects are not present in any more demanding sense in which being present implies being about or being among us. So it is tempting to construe any such wholesale claim in terms of present existence rather than anything more demanding. On this reading, to say that everything is present is just to say that everything presently exists; and here 'everything' can be understood to include abstract objects within its range (cf. Williamson 2013, p. 24).

However, this is a claim that eternalists are likewise happy to endorse. If dinosaurs exist, as eternalists claim, then they presently exist. Accordingly, presentists had better not claim of everything, abstract or non-abstract alike, that it is present, because—as we have just seen—this would force a reading of 'is present' that makes that claim trivially true. Instead, they should be understood to be saying no more than that everything *in time* is present, where this now involves a genuine and explicit restriction rather than a different sort of quantifier. This still leaves the question of what is here meant by 'is present'.

In reply, one might insist that 'present' simply means *present* and nothing else, and so in particular does not mean *presently existing*. However, the Williamsonian view according to which always everything always exists and things that once were dinosaurs are still about—albeit in a non-concrete way, inconsistent with their presently being dinosaurs—shows that presentists cannot rest content with such deflationary a characterisation (cf. Williamson 2013, pp. 7–8). For, given no more than this, the Williamsonian might likewise endorse that everything in time is present while conceding that absolutely nothing is a dinosaur. And yet, the Williamsonian also insists that there are non-concrete things that once were dinosaurs—a claim that presentists would want to reject.

At the same time, however, presentists cannot successfully rephrase their claim in terms of being concrete either. For, even according to certain eternalists, everything in time may be said to be concrete, including dinosaurs located in the past; and since if ϕ then presently ϕ , for such eternalists, everything in time will also presently be concrete, even if some such things are only located at remote times. Thus, if there is any dilemma at all that presentists face, it has to do with the intended reading of 'is present' rather than the intended reading of 'everything'.

The presentist may of course try out combinations of these claims, e.g., by saying that everything in time is both concrete and presently about. Ultimately, however, it is far

from clear why her presentism should commit the presentist to an ontology of things in time exclusively composed of concrete things. A positive answer would have to unpack what the intended notion of concreteness is meant to involve—which might prove no easier task. After all, if it at all makes sense to speak of things that are neither abstract nor concrete, why shouldn't some of the present things be such—even if ex-dinosaurs are not among them?

Williamson may be right, then, that we need a fresh start in order to articulate the debate among different views on time and existence (Williamson 2013, p. 25). However, his conclusion that we should articulate the debate in such a way that the traditional oppositions no longer figure, seems to us to be both highly implausible and premature. As we shall argue in what follows, presentism can perspicuously be formulated without any appeal to the notion of being present—or the notion of being concrete, for that matter. This may come as a surprise.

3

Let us say that *m* is *new* iff always in the past, *m* does not exist, that *m* is *doomed* iff always in the future, *m* does not exist, and that *m* is *in time* iff sometimes, for some time *t*, *m* is contemporaneous with *t*. The relation of contemporaneity deployed in the latter equivalence—which unlike the first two does not pretend to be a mere stipulation—is the one familiar from standard B-theories and can be glossed by distinguishing three kinds of cases: if *m* and *n* are times, *m* and *n* are contemporaneous iff $m = n$; if *m* is not a time but *n* is, *m* is contemporaneous with *n* iff *m* is located at *n*; and if neither *m* nor *n* is a time, *m* and *n* are contemporaneous iff there is a time at which both *m* and *n* are located. We furthermore take contemporaneity to be *existence-entailing*, in the sense that always, for all *x*, always, for all *y*, always, if *x* and *y* are contemporaneous, both *x* and *y* exist.

Now let us stipulate that *m* is *one-off* iff *m* is both new and doomed, and suppose that, as a first stab, we tried to formulate presentism as follows:

(1*) Always, $\forall x(x \text{ is in time} \rightarrow x \text{ is one-off})$.

By the characterisation of being in time, it follows from (1*) that always every time is one-off; and thus, if we use '*t*', '*t*' etc. for time-variables, we get:

(2) Always, $\forall t(t \text{ is one-off})$.

At first sight, (2) would seem compatible with the idea that, sometimes, there is more than one time. We set out to show that this appearance is deceptive. Plausibly, we have all of the following:

(i) $t \neq t' \rightarrow t < t' \vee t' < t$

(ii) At *t*, *t* exists

(iii) $t < t' \ \& \ (\text{At } t', \varphi) \rightarrow \text{At } t, \text{ Sometimes in the future, } \varphi$

(iv) $t' < t \ \& \ (\text{At } t', \varphi) \rightarrow \text{At } t, \text{ Sometimes in the past, } \varphi$

- (v) $(\text{At } t, \varphi) \ \& \ \text{At } t, (\varphi \rightarrow \psi) \rightarrow \text{At } t, \psi$
- (vi) For φ tautologous: $\text{At } t, \varphi$
- (vii) $\varphi \rightarrow \exists t \text{ At } t, \varphi$
- (viii) $(\text{At } t, \neg\varphi) \rightarrow \neg(\text{At } t, \varphi)$.

Assume for *reductio* that there are two distinct times, t and t' . By (i), either $t < t'$ or $t' < t$. Suppose that $t < t'$ (the other case is similar and so we shall leave it aside). By the principles (ii) to (vi), we derive:

- (a) $\text{At } t, t'$ is not one-off
- (b) $\text{At } t', t$ is not one-off.

Now by (2) each of t and t' is one-off, and so by (vii), there is a time t_0 at which this is the case, whence by (v) and (vi) we derive:

- (c) $\text{At } t_0, t$ is one-off
- (d) $\text{At } t_0, t'$ is one-off.

By (a), (d) and (viii), $t \neq t_0$. Accordingly, by (i), either $t < t_0$ or $t_0 < t$. But both disjuncts are impossible. For if $t < t_0$, then by (ii), (iv), (v) and (vi), at t_0, t is not one-off, which contradicts (c) given (viii). Similarly, if $t_0 < t$, then by (ii), (iii), (v) and (vi), at t_0, t is not one-off, which again contradicts (c) given (viii). Hence, the initial hypothesis that there are two distinct times must be rejected. Given that this conclusion is reached using only principles which always hold, provided that (2) holds, the conclusion itself always holds:

- (3) Always, $\forall t \forall t' (t' = t)$.

Notice that (vii) entails that there is at least one time (just substitute any tautology for φ). Given (3) and the fact that (vii) always holds, we thus have:

- (4) Always, $\exists t \forall t' (t' = t)$.

Accordingly, once (1*) is in place, and hence so is (2), both (3) and (4) likewise hold.

4

That (2) to (4) hold is of course all fine as far as presentists are concerned. For fear of making the prefixed 'always' otiose or equivocating on 'time', this presupposes that presentists treat tense-operators as not further analysable in terms of quantification over times, just as modalists treat modal operators as not further analysable in terms of quantification over possible worlds. But this presupposition should provide no cause for concern.³

However, (1*) nonetheless seems too strong a claim for many a presentist's taste. For, given that contemporaneity is existence-entailing, (1*) also entails that everything in time is *instantaneous*, in the sense that for all x in time, always, if there is a time with which x is contemporaneous, always in the past or future, there is no time with which

x is contemporaneous. Most presentists would want to retain belief in things in time, other than times, that were already about in the past or will continue to be about in the future — where this now translates into the claim that some things in time were located at some time in the past or will be located at some time in the future.

What presentists will still want to rule out, by contrast, is that there are things in time that will only ever be contemporaneous with some time in the future, or have only ever been contemporaneous with some time in the past. This now suggests the following, improved presentist thesis:

(1) Always, $\exists t(t \text{ is one-off} \ \& \ \forall x(x \text{ is in time} \rightarrow x \text{ is contemporaneous with } t))$.

(1) leaves room for non-instantaneous things in time.⁴ It likewise permits the existence of non-concrete things in time, as long as they are contemporaneous with some one-off time. And yet, (1) still is in opposition to eternalism, the Williamsonian view and the Growing Block Theory. For, on neither of these views is there ever anything that is doomed. *A fortiori*, on neither of these views is there ever any one-off time.

Like (1*), (1) entails that always there is but one time. For recall that in order for time m and time n to be contemporaneous, m and n must be identical. Hence, given the characterisation of being in time, (1) straightforwardly entails (4). Similarly, since ‘ $\exists t(t \text{ is one-off} \ \& \ \forall x(x \text{ is in time} \rightarrow x \text{ is contemporaneous with } t))$ ’ entails ‘ $\forall t(t \text{ is one-off} \ \& \ \forall t' (t = t'))$ ’, which in turn entails both ‘ $\forall t \forall t' (t = t')$ ’ and ‘ $\forall t(t \text{ is one-off})$ ’, by the K-axiom for ‘always’, (1) likewise entails both (2) and (3).

Since what always holds, presently holds, (1) entails that there now is a unique time t with which everything in time is contemporaneous. Since (1) does not employ the notion of presentness, however, it does not immediately follow that t is present. Accordingly, one might begin to wonder whether (1) is at all suited to capture the presentist’s key thought. Thus one might ask: ‘Couldn’t t be some future time, say January 1st, 2058, 11 am GMT?’

The answer is ‘no’. For suppose that t is future. By (ii), at t , t exists. So, sometimes in the future, t exists. But then if t also existed now, it would not presently be doomed. Similar considerations show that t could not be some past time given that t is new. In this reply, we rely on the inference from ‘ t is a future/past time’ and ‘At t , ϕ ’ to ‘Sometimes in the future/past, ϕ ’. Thus our reply makes use of ‘is future’ and ‘is past’ in application to times — terms which are in good standing only provided that ‘is present’ is. However, note that so does the worry to which our reply answers: for what becomes of the worry when January 1st, 2058, 11 am GMT exists but is neither past nor future?⁵

In any case, the fact remains that (1) itself does not make use of ‘is present’ or its cognates. And since ‘now’ never fails to refer, it should suffice to allay the aforementioned worry, that t is now and that, uncontroversially, now is not some time in 2058. In addition, observe that in application to times, presentists can happily subscribe to the Williamsonian construal of ‘is present’ in terms of ‘presently exists’, as for them, always, only one time exists. By contrast, no view that countenances more than one time can consistently do so, given only that whatever ‘is present’ might mean, always at most one time is present. So, if Williamson is right that the best we can do when trying to fasten

upon a clear sense of ‘is present’ is to understand it as being equivalent to ‘presently exists’, presentism even scores some points.

Statements of the form ‘At t , φ ’ are standardly analysed in terms of presentness: At t , φ iff Always, (t is present $\rightarrow \varphi$). If in restating the presentist thesis and deriving its crucial consequences, we had made use of statements of this form, similar qualms might arise that we have not done away with presentness after all. One may of course argue that the standard analysis is optional. But whatever the prospects of this reply, the crucial point here is that we did not have to employ statements of this form when formulating presentism’s core claim (1), or when showing that (2) to (4) follow from (1) or that presentism, as thus understood, is in opposition to the other contenders. (Contrast this with the derivation of (4) from (1*.)

What about the notion of contemporaneity? Isn’t being contemporaneous with a time the same as being present at that time? Sure. But the correct understanding of this relational notion of being present was never in doubt, precisely because it allows for recapture in terms of contemporaneity with times. The relational notion thus is considered to be in perfectly good standing on anyone’s count.

At last, one might be suspicious of our use of tense operators and the assumption, made on the presentist’s behalf, that existence claims are sensitive to embedding in the contexts that these operators create. Whether the truth-conditions for tensed statements permit systematic specification in purely tensed terms may be a vexed, if ultimately resolvable issue (for a positive reply, see Correia and Rosenkranz 2011, pp. 103–13). But whether or not they are themselves irreducibly tensed, such specifications need make no play with attributions of presentness, as long as the statements whose truth-conditions are to be specified do not do so—and neither (1) nor the principles used to derive (2) to (4) do so.

5

We have argued that appearances notwithstanding, presentism admits of a formulation that makes no use whatsoever of the notion of presentness or cognate notions and instead only deploys quantification, tense-operators and the relation of contemporaneity, which latter can ultimately be reduced in terms of identity and a primitive relation of temporal location. In this way presentists can skirt any problems—conceptual, theoretical, or dialectical—that accrue from the use of ‘is present’ or cognates in attempts to formulate their view. In particular, they need no longer concern themselves with the task of providing an interpretation of that term that both ensures that their core claim is neither trivially true nor obviously false and forestalls its hostile takeover by their opponents.

On this rendition of the view, presentism’s core claim entails that always there is only one time and that always no time ever existed before or will ever exist thereafter. Presentism thus remains in opposition to eternalism, the Williamsonian view and the Growing Block Theory, as on neither of these views is there ever anything that fails to exist in the future. Presentism’s core claim likewise entails that always, everything that sometimes is located at some time is located at the unique time that presently exists, thereby ensuring that presently there are no dinosaurs and no Martian outposts. In

accordance with what most presentists would want to say, it nonetheless leaves room for the existence of non-instantaneous things in time that in the past were located at the unique time that then existed or that, in the future, will be located at the unique time that will then exist.

Like the Williamsonian view, presentism as stated allows for non-concrete things in time, as long as they are located at the only time that presently exists. But unlike proponents of the Williamsonian view, neither are presentists committed to the existence of any non-concrete things in time nor do they have any need for such things in order to make their ontological thesis cohere with the observation that, in the past, there were dinosaurs. True: while presentism as stated rules out dinosaurs—since no dinosaur is located now—it does not likewise rule out ex-dinosaurs, i.e., things that are not dinosaurs but once were. But to the extent that there is reason to believe in ex-dinosaurs, and ex-dinosaurs contemporaneous with now in particular, only if there is independent reason to believe the Williamsonian thesis that always everything always exists—a thesis that presentists are anyway committed to reject—this problem, insofar as it is a problem at all, proves purely academic.

The presentists' key thesis (1)—that always there is a one-off time with which everything in time is contemporaneous—in conjunction with the observation that always 'now' refers to some time, implies:

(5) Always, 'Everything in time is contemporaneous with now' is true.⁶

This is a desirable result that shows presentism to be immune to any complaint to the effect that it remains unclear on each occasion which is the unique one-off time that it posits. Indeed, only presentists would want to endorse (5). Like (1), (5) neither uses nor mentions 'is present'. Note, however, that (5) is irremediably metalinguistic: given that the indexical 'now' always takes wide scope, even if we can semantically descend on each occasion after eliminating 'always', we cannot do so within the context of 'always'. To the extent that metaphysical theses ought to be general without being irremediably metalinguistic, (5) therefore cannot take the place of (1). Accordingly, we submit that (1) is the presentists' best shot. Presentism, it thus turns out, has no need for presentness.

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Notes

1 See Crisp (2004) for some pertinent references.

- 2 Readers unconvinced by the foregoing diagnosis are invited to re-read Putnam (1962) on the abuse of the analytic-synthetic distinction.
- 3 Quantification over things of a kind remains intelligible, even when only one thing of that kind exists. Just as the actualist's 'objection is not to worlds as such, but to possible worlds' and 'not to persons as such, but to possible persons', presentists do not object to times as such, but only to past and future times (Fine 2005, p. 212). Times are here being conceived as *concreta*. Even if presentists may allow for many abstract times, they are not the kinds of things that are sometimes concrete (cf. Williamson 2013, pp. 7–8). Presentists may conceive of concrete times as entities *sui generis* or as reducible to collections of point-sized events, states or tensed facts.
- 4 (1) allows for temporally extended things *with continuous existences*, e.g. football matches, and can validate what we ordinarily say about them, making use of metric tense-operators. 'The match will last for 90 minutes' can be paraphrased as '90 minutes hence, (the match takes place & $\forall n(n \leq 90 \leftrightarrow n \text{ minutes ago, the match takes place})$)'. Note that here we quantify over numbers and not times.
- 5 There is an alternative way of making the same point that instead relies on (ix) Always, $(\forall t' \text{ At } t', \varphi) \rightarrow \varphi$.
If t is January 1st, 2058, 11 am GMT, then by (ix) and (3), if at t , more than 40 years earlier, Émilien is born, then 40 years ago, Émilien is born — which happens to be false. However, to sidestep the *prima facie* problem outlined in the next but one paragraph, we do not here wish to rely on this move.
- 6 If 'Everything in time is contemporaneous with now' is an abstract type belonging to an abstract language, e.g. of the kind described by Lewis (1983), it always exists. But (5) does not commit presentists to the claim that 'Everything in time is contemporaneous with now' always exists, because, *pace* Williamson (2013, pp. 148–58), arguably, for some conditions Φ , something may sometimes meet Φ without existing. Being true may just be such a condition.

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