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### Presentism and fatalism

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## PRESENTISM AND FATALISM

Michael C. Rea

It is widely believed that presentism is compatible with both a libertarian view of human freedom and an unrestricted principle of bivalence. I argue that, in fact, presentists must choose between bivalence and libertarianism: if presentism is true, then either the future is open or no one is free in the way that libertarians understand freedom.

Presentism is the view that it always has been and always will be the case that there are no actual but non-present objects. On this view, dinosaurs and other merely past objects did exist, but there is no sense in which they do exist. Likewise, merely future objects and events (your future grandchildren, for example) perhaps will exist; but, again, there is no sense in which they do exist. Yesterday's sins are quite literally gone; what tomorrow may bring is in no way actual.

It is widely believed that presentism is compatible with an unrestricted principle of bivalence. In particular, presentism is typically thought to be compatible with the view that bivalence holds for sentences of the form 'S will do A'. In fact, many of the most well-known defenders of presentism will insist on bivalence for such propositions because, as it happens, they are theists who believe that God knows in advance everything that will happen in the world. It is also widely believed that presentism is compatible with libertarianism—the view that we are free, and that freedom is incompatible with determinism. And many of the same people who insist on the compatibility of bivalence with presentism also insist on the truth of libertarianism. In what follows, however, I will argue that, in fact, presentists must *choose* between bivalence and libertarianism. This fact is yet another in a growing list of costs associated with presentism.<sup>1</sup>

The discussion that follows is divided into five sections. In Section I, I briefly explain the content of presentism. In Section II, I present one of the most common objections against it: the objection that presentists cannot supply grounds for past and future tense propositions. I also briefly sketch the sorts of things that presentists will have to say in order to respond adequately to the objection. In subsequent sections, I show how reflection on the grounding objection and the constraints on an adequate reply gives rise to a straightforward argument from presentism plus bivalence to the conclusion that no one is free. (I assume throughout that freedom is to be understood as libertarians understand it.) In Section III, I discuss a fairly standard fatalist argument and I show that the standard responses to that

<sup>1</sup>For discussion of other costs associated with presentism, see Rea [2004 and references therein].

argument are unavailable to a presentist. In Section IV, I present the main argument of this paper—the argument for the conclusion that, if presentism is true and bivalence holds, then no one is free. Finally, in Section V, I dismiss three responses to the argument of Section IV, thus reaching the conclusion that presentists must give up either bivalence or libertarianism.

## I. Presentism

One standard way of fleshing out the content of presentism is to compare the debate between presentists and their opponents with a parallel debate about possible worlds—the debate between *actualists* and *possibilists*. Actualists say that whatever exists exists in the actual world. Possibilists deny this. There are, they say, some things that do not actually exist. David Lewis is an example of a possibilist.<sup>2</sup> On his view, other possible worlds and their inhabitants exist; but they are not among the inhabitants of the actual world. There *are* flying horses, for example. They just don't exist here in the actual world. Actualists, on the other hand, deny the existence of mere possibilia. Other possible worlds might in fact exist. They might, for example, be abstract states of affairs. But if they do exist, they are among the inhabitants of the actual world. Moreover, talk of 'the inhabitants of other possible worlds' isn't talk about some class of things that *exist* somewhere other than here in the actual world. Rather, it is simply talk about properties that would have been exemplified or states of affairs that would have obtained had things gone differently.

Presentism is analogous to actualism. Just as actualists say that there is nothing that exists outside the actual world, so presentists say that there is nothing in the actual world that exists outside the present time. Other times might in fact exist. They might, for example, be abstract states of affairs. But if they do exist, they are among the inhabitants of the present time. Moreover, talk of merely past (or merely future) objects isn't talk about some class of things that *exist* somewhere other than at the present time. Rather, it is simply talk about properties that were or will be exemplified, or states of affairs that did or will obtain, when other times were or will be present.

I said above that, on presentism, other times *might* exist—if, for example, they are thought of as abstract states of affairs. This is not the only way to think about times. For example, times might also be thought of as concrete events. For present purposes I will operate under the assumption that times are abstract. But nothing of substance depends on this assumption.<sup>3</sup>

As I shall think of them, then, times are analogous to abstract possible worlds. The present argument does not depend on any particular account of

<sup>2</sup>Better: Lewis is an example of *one sort* of possibilist. Michael Bergmann [1999] distinguishes *anti-Meinongian actualism* (the view that, necessarily, everything exists) from *anti-Lewisian actualism* (the view that, necessarily, everything exists in the actual world). Lewis is an anti-Meinongian actualist: he agrees that, necessarily, there are no nonexistent objects. But, of course, he is not an anti-Lewisian actualist. For purposes here, *actualism* is being treated as equivalent to anti-Lewisian actualism.

<sup>3</sup>One might worry that talk of times is unacceptable from the point of view of contemporary physics. The reason is that such talk might seem to presuppose that time as we know it is an absolute, observer-independent feature of reality, whereas the Special Theory of Relativity seems to imply that space and time are both mere appearances of a more fundamental reality—namely, spacetime. However, there are ways of understanding talk of times that get around this concern. For discussion, see, e.g., Rea [2004: sec.4].

what abstract times are like; but if one is wanted, we might start by saying that a time is a *present-tense maximal* state of affairs. Intuitively, and very roughly, a present-tense maximal state of affairs is a total state of the world at an instant, *minus* all of the past- and future-tense truths. More rigorously: say that a state of affairs *S* is *future directed* just in case either *S*'s obtaining entails that some contingent thing will exist or *S*'s obtaining entails that no contingent thing will exist; and then define a *past-directed* state of affairs in the obviously parallel way.<sup>4</sup> Then a state of affairs *S* is present-tense maximal if and only if, for every atomic state of affairs *S\** that is neither future-directed nor past-directed, either *S* includes *S\** or *S* precludes *S\**.<sup>5</sup>

Given that times are abstract, talk of what is, was, or will be true when a time *t* is, was, or will be present just comes to talk about what *t* includes, with the added supposition that *t* in fact did, does, or will obtain. Thus, for example, to say that *it was true at t that p* is just to say that *t* includes *p* and that (on eternalism) *t* obtains at a region of spacetime earlier than now or (on presentism) *t* did obtain. Talk of what *will be true* at a time is to be understood in the obviously parallel way.

Note too that nothing in the definition of a present-tense maximal state of affairs rules out its including past- or future-directed states of affairs. As we shall see below, the grounding objection provides presentists with reason to suppose that times do include such states of affairs. It is to that issue that we now turn.

## II. The Grounding Objection

Many philosophers are attracted to the idea that truth supervenes on being.<sup>6</sup> To say that truth supervenes on being is just to say that any world that duplicates ours with respect to what there is and how things are also duplicates ours with respect to what is true. The basic idea is that whatever is true—or at least whatever is contingently true—must somehow be grounded in what there actually is. Put this way, the principle that truth supervenes on being seems closely allied to the correspondence theory of truth (though the exact nature of the alliance is rather difficult to tease out). But, according to some philosophers, the principle that truth supervenes on being is incompatible with presentism. The argument proceeds as follows:

- (i) Suppose presentism is true. Then (ii) our world doesn't include past or future objects or events. But (iii) if our world doesn't include past or future objects or events, then there is nothing in the world that could ground propositions about the past or future. Therefore, (iv) if truth supervenes on being, then propositions about the past and future are not true. But (v) truth

<sup>4</sup>'Contingent things' might be objects or events; and I assume that an event exists when and only when it occurs.

<sup>5</sup>I assume that states of affairs that include laws of nature will not be atomic. One state of affairs includes another just in case the obtaining of the first state of affairs entails the obtaining of the second. One state of affairs precludes another just in case the obtaining of the first entails that the second does not obtain.

<sup>6</sup>For starters, see Armstrong [1997], Bigelow [1988: 122, 132–3], Lewis [2002], and Sider [2001, esp. chap. 2].

does supervene on being, and (vi) at least some propositions about the past and future are true. Therefore, (vii) presentism must be false.<sup>7</sup>

If we grant that truth supervenes on being, the crucial premises in this argument are (iii) and (vi). The choice between the two is essentially a choice between supplying some ‘being’ for truths about the past and future to supervene upon or somehow making plausible the claim that all of those propositions are false.

Of course, some presentists might not want to grant that truth supervenes on being.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, some might not even want to grant anything in the neighbourhood of that thesis—they might, for example, be happy to say that truths about the past are simply brute, not grounded in anything at all. For the moment, I will suppose that presentists in general will *not* want to go this route. In Section V, however, I will explicitly consider the question whether rejecting the demand for grounds provides the resources for a successful reply to my main argument; and I will conclude that it does not.

I will also assume that presentists will not want to say that propositions about the past and the future are *all* false. Such a denial would make presentism unpalatable in the extreme. Thus, if presentists are to offer a response to the grounding objection, it seems that they must reject premise (iii).

Here is the standard way of rejecting premise (iii): Truths about the past and the future are grounded in irreducibly tensed properties of material objects or events.<sup>9</sup> What makes it true that there were dinosaurs is just some present object or some present event having the property of being such that there were dinosaurs. And what makes it true (if it is true) that there will be outposts on Mars is just some present object or event having the property of being such that there will be outposts on Mars. If an event is just the having of a property by some object or event, then, on this view, past and future tense truths are, one and all, grounded in present events.<sup>10</sup>

This response does not quite handle *all* of the truths about the past that we might want to handle. For example, it doesn’t by itself tell us what grounds propositions that apparently refer to things that no longer exist. It also doesn’t tell us what grounds truths apparently involving cross-temporal relations. So, for example, a presentist should want to affirm propositions like (1–3):

- (1) Aristotle was a philosopher.
- (2) Many contemporary philosophers admire Aristotle.
- (3) Actions performed by Aristotle are among the causes of some of the mental states of contemporary philosophers.

<sup>7</sup>This way of putting it generalizes a variety of more specific objections, some of which are discussed further below. For relevant discussion, see, e.g., Adams [1986], Bigelow [1996], Chisholm [1990], Crisp [forthcoming], Fitch [1994], Keller [2004], Markosian [2004], Rea [2004], Sider [1999; 2001].

<sup>8</sup>Trenton Merricks is one such presentist. See his [2007] for extended arguments against the being-supervenience thesis and related principles.

<sup>9</sup>See, especially, the works by Bigelow, Chisholm, Crisp, Keller, Markosian, and Rea cited in note 7.

<sup>10</sup>Or, what comes to the same thing: On this view, present tense propositions are grounded in *concrete states of affairs*, or in the *obtainings of abstract states of affairs*, or in *facts* (construed as identical to events, or concrete states of affairs, or obtainings of abstract states of affairs).

But if presentism is true, then (assuming Aristotle is not currently enjoying some sort of post-mortem existence) Aristotle is not available to have properties, to be an object of admiration, or to be a cause of anything. Thus, it is hard to see how (1–3) could be true.

I will not take the trouble here to spell out in detail the responses that presentists typically offer to this sort of problem. What I want to focus on is simply the general fact that *if* one accepts the demand for grounds for past and future tense propositions, the reply to questions about how to handle propositions like (1–3) will have to resemble what I called the standard reply to the initial grounding objection. To accommodate such propositions, all of the relevant grounds will have to be somehow packed into the present time. So, in other words, presentists will have to posit a variety of things whose existence or occurrence *at the present time* will together entail the past and future tense truths that the presentist wants to be able to accommodate. Once this is clear, however, the argument for the conclusion that presentists must either reject bivalence or give up human freedom is straightforward, as the next two sections demonstrate.

### III. Fatalism

Consider, for starters, the following fatalist argument. Suppose the present time is  $t$ , and Sally stands up at  $t$ ; and let  $t^*$  be some time one thousand years prior to now. Then:

- (F1) It was true at  $t^*$  that Sally will stand up at  $t$ .<sup>11</sup>
- (F2) Necessarily, if it was true at  $t^*$  that Sally will stand up at  $t$ , then Sally stands up at  $t$ .
- (F3) Sally never had and never will have a choice about whether F1 is true.
- (β3) If  $p$  and if  $x$  never had and never will have a choice about  $p$ , and if  $p$  entails  $q$ , then  $x$  never had and never will have a choice about  $q$ .<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup>Here and throughout I shall operate under the pretence that singular propositions containing Sally as subject exist and have truth values even at times when Sally does not exist. The pretence is harmless, however; for presentists who are bothered by it can simply adopt their favourite strategy for handling sentences like ‘Aristotle was a philosopher’ in order to accommodate F1 and other sentences that appear to express propositions about Sally. And if it turns out that all such strategies fail, then presentists face even worse problems than I am here attributing to them.

<sup>12</sup>In his well-known Consequence Argument for incompatibilism, Peter van Inwagen [1983] relies on the following rule of inference (where ‘ $Np$ ’ abbreviates ‘ $p$  and no one has, had, or will have a choice about  $p$ ’):

$$(\beta) \quad Np \ \& \ N(p \supset q) \Rightarrow Nq$$

As it turns out, Principle  $\beta$  has counterexamples. David Widerker [1987] has proposed an improvement that seems to be counterexample-free:

$$(\beta2) \quad Np \ \& \ \Box(p \supset q) \Rightarrow Nq$$

(For discussion of this and other strengthened transfer principles, see Finch and Warfield [1998 and references therein].) Principle  $\beta3$  which appears in my argument above is a version of  $\beta2$  specified to an individual. The specification would be unneeded if I simply assumed (as seems plausible) that if  $x$  never had and never will have a choice about whether she stands at  $t$ , then no one has, had, or will have a choice about

- (F4) Therefore: Sally never had and never will have a choice about whether she stands at  $t$ .

F1 follows from the fact that Sally is now standing together with the assumption that bivalence holds for sentences of the form 'S will do A'. F2 is uncontroversial; and, for purposes here, I'll assume that  $\beta_3$  is as well. F3 is supposed to be true because facts about the past and facts about logical entailment aren't up to us.

For those who want to preserve bivalence, the standard response to this sort of argument is to give up F3, and to do so by saying that we have power over the truth of propositions like F1. But how could we have such power? How could Sally have power over what was true one thousand years ago? To this question we find two answers in the literature—answers that are superficially different, but, as I see it, identical at root:

*Answer 1:* The predicate 'true at  $t$ ' is like the predicate 'true in Indiana'. One might say things like:

- (4) 'An earthquake is happening out west' is true in Indiana.

But presumably what one would mean by saying such a thing is that it is true *simpliciter* that an earthquake is happening, and that, from the point of view of Indiana, the occurrence of the earthquake is to the west. Likewise, then, with claims like F1: To say that it was true at  $t^*$  that Sally will stand up at  $t$  is just to say that, when  $t^*$  was present, 'Sally stands at  $t$ ' was true *simpliciter* and the occurrence of that event was, from the point of view of  $t^*$ , in the future. Thus, F1 is equivalent to something like F5:

- (F5) It is true at  $t$  that Sally stands up, and  $t^*$  is earlier than  $t$ .<sup>13</sup>

But once this is clear, the fatalist argument is defanged. For the fatalist has given us no reason for thinking that Sally never had and never will have a choice about the truth of F5. Indeed, there is good reason to think that Sally *does* have a choice about F5—namely, the fact that she seemingly has a choice about the occurrence of the event that explains, or grounds the truth of 'Sally stands up at  $t$ '. But if she has a choice about F5, and if F5 is equivalent to F1, then she has a choice about F1. Thus, F3 may safely be rejected.

This reply makes perfect sense on eternalism. According to the eternalist, when  $t^*$  is present, both  $t$  and the event of Sally's standing at  $t$  *exist*; they

that. But the price of introducing this assumption is added complexity later on. (For example, I would have to address questions about why we should think that no one existing *prior* to  $t^*$  could have acted freely in ways that would have made it false that  $t^*$  has the property *being such that Sally will stand at  $t$* .)

<sup>13</sup>Peter van Inwagen [1983: 37ff] offers an understanding of the 'true at  $t$ ' locution that implies that F1 would be equivalent not to F5 but to something like 'If someone were to refer at  $t^*$  to the proposition that Sally stands up at  $t$ , she would refer to something true'. But this understanding of 'true at  $t$ ' is problematic. To see why, let P be the proposition that no one is referring to any proposition at  $t$ . Now, P might be true at  $t$ ; but it is clearly false that if someone were to refer to P at  $t$ , they would refer to something true. Thus, the proposed understanding of true at  $t$  fails.

just exist *at a distance* from  $t^*$ . So there is no problem in affirming F5. But matters are different for a presentist. On presentism, F5 is either necessarily false or such that Sally could not possibly have a choice about its truth.

Taken at face value, F5 implies that there is an  $x$  and there is a  $y$  such that  $x$  is earlier than  $y$ . But this is unacceptable on presentism. For presentism implies that earlier events do not co-exist with later ones; and if they cannot co-exist, they cannot stand in relations to one another, and they cannot both be in the range of the existential quantifier. So, taken at face value, F5, on presentism, is necessarily false.

Of course, a presentist might insist that the right way to read F5 is as follows: ‘Sally stands up at  $t$ ’ is true; and when  $t^*$  was present, ‘ $t$  will be present’ was true. But if this is how we are to read F5, then we have no reason to think that Sally could possibly have a choice about its truth. After all, when  $t^*$  obtained, Sally did not exist. How, then, could it have been up to her whether ‘ $t$  will be present’ was true? This, of course, is precisely the question to which the fatalist demands an answer. Thus, any answer the presentist gives must be distinct from the one we are presently considering.

*Answer 2:* Rather than focus on the predicate ‘true at  $t$ ’, one might resist the fatalist by attempting to draw a principled distinction between facts about the past that we have a choice about and facts about the past that we have no choice about. The standard move here is to distinguish ‘hard facts’ about the past, which do not depend on the present actions of free agents, from ‘soft facts’, which do depend on the present actions of free agents. One then goes on to argue for the conclusion that facts like F1 are soft. This is what is often referred to as ‘Ockham’s Way Out’ [cf. Plantinga 1986]. If facts like F1 are soft, then there is no reason to doubt that we have a choice about whether they obtain. Thus, the road is clear to say that Sally has a choice about F1.

As with the previous response, this one, as well as the hard fact/soft fact distinction it depends on, makes perfectly good sense on eternalism. According to the eternalist, both  $t^*$  and the event of Sally’s standing at  $t$  exist. Thus, there is no obstacle to saying that the event of Sally’s standing explains, or is the ground of, the truth of F1. Thus, there is no difficulty understanding how the truth of F1 might depend on Sally’s free act.

On presentism, however, the Ockhamist response is untenable. When  $t^*$  was present, the event of Sally’s standing at  $t$  did not exist. It was not within the range of the existential quantifier. There simply *was no such thing*. Thus, the truth of F1 could not have depended upon or been explained by it.<sup>14</sup>

So far I have simply been explaining why the standard response to the fatalist argument is not available to a presentist. I have not yet argued that presentists fall prey to the argument. For all I have said so far, there might yet be some other (perhaps even closely analogous) response to the fatalist argument that the presentist could endorse. But I will now argue that this is not so.

<sup>14</sup>For a fuller defence of this claim, see Finch and Rea [forthcoming].



#### IV. The Main Argument

As before, let  $t$  be the present time and let  $t^*$  be a time that obtained exactly one thousand years ago. Let  $P_S$  be the tensed proposition *that Sally will stand exactly one thousand years hence*; and let us suppose that  $P_S$  was true at  $t^*$ .

If presentism is true, then what grounds the truth of  $P_S$  at  $t^*$  is (something relevantly like) the occurrence at  $t^*$  of an event involving the irreducibly tensed property *being such that Sally will stand exactly one thousand years hence*. Let  $E_S$  be an event that grounds the truth of  $P_S$  (perhaps there is just one such event, or perhaps there is more than one), and let  $G_S$  be whatever tensed property is involved in  $E_S$ . Note that, on presentism (unlike eternalism), since Sally did not exist at  $t^*$ ,  $G_S$  will not be a property that involves any relation to Sally or to contingent events involving Sally.<sup>15</sup> Thus, it looks as if  $G_S$  will be a property that is intrinsic to whatever has it.<sup>16</sup>

The argument, then, proceeds as follows:

Main Argument

- (M1) Presentism is true. (Assumption)
- (M2)  $P_S$  was true at  $t^*$ . (Assumption)
- (M3) If presentism is true and if  $P_S$  was true at  $t^*$ , then the truth of  $P_S$  at  $t^*$  was not even partly grounded in the occurrence of any event involving Sally or in any exercising of her agent-causal power.<sup>17</sup> (Premise)
- (M4) Therefore: The truth of  $P_S$  at  $t^*$  was not even partly grounded in the occurrence of any event involving Sally, or in any exercising of her agent-causal power. (From M1, M2, M3)
- (M5) If the truth of a proposition  $p$  at a past time  $t_n$  was not even partly grounded in the occurrence of any event involving S, or in the agent causal activity of S, then S has never had and will never have a choice about whether  $p$  was true at  $t_n$ . (Premise)
- (M6) Therefore: Sally has never had and will never have a choice about whether M2 is true. (From M2, M4, M5)
- (M7) M2 entails that Sally stands now (at  $t$ , one thousand years later than  $t^*$ ). (Trivial)

<sup>15</sup>A description of  $G_S$ —like the description *being such that Sally will stand exactly one thousand years hence*—might make reference to Sally. But presentists must see that as only pretence—at least if, as we are assuming,  $G_S$  is a property that is exemplified at a time when Sally does not exist. Cf. n. 11.

<sup>16</sup>At any rate, it will be a property that is *independent of accompaniment by other contingent beings* [cf. Langton and Lewis 1998]. Whether that means it is a property that *cannot differ among duplicates*, however, is hard to say.

<sup>17</sup>I include the second disjunct to avoid assuming that exercisings of agent-causal power are events. I do assume, however, that there are events like *Sally's not agent-causing anything at  $t$  and Sally's not refraining from standing up*. Thus, if one were to say that the truth of  $P_S$  at  $t^*$  depends in part on Sally's not refraining from standing up, one would (by this assumption) still be committed to saying that the truth of  $P_S$  at  $t$  depends on the occurrence of an event involving Sally. This assumption could be done away with, but at the cost of adding some complexity to the discussion.

( $\beta 3$ ) If  $p$  and if  $x$  never had and never will have a choice about  $p$ , and if  $p$  entails  $q$ , then  $x$  never had and never will have a choice about  $q$ . (Premise)

(M8) Therefore: Sally has never had and will never have a choice about P2.  
(From M2, M6, M7,  $\beta 3$ .)

If this argument is sound, and if (as seems obvious) one acts freely at a time only if one has, had, or will have a choice about what one does at that time, it follows that, given presentism and bivalence, Sally is not free. Moreover, the argument generalizes. Thus, if the Main Argument is sound, then, given presentism and bivalence, no one is free.

The unsupported premises in the argument are M2, M3, M5, and  $\beta 3$ . To give up M2 is to give up bivalence. As I made clear at the outset of this paper, I am happy to concede that this is one way of resisting the argument. I have no argument to offer in support of  $\beta 3$ ; but I do not expect it to be a serious target for resistance as it seems, even upon close inspection, to be counterexample-free. M3 and M5, however, deserve some further comment.

M5 says, in short, that a person  $S$  has (or had, or will have) a choice about the truth of a proposition  $p$  only if the truth of  $p$  is at least partly grounded in what  $S$  does. It is notoriously hard to say exactly what grounding amounts to; but it seems to me that, at a minimum, to say that the truth of  $p$  is grounded in some event  $e$  is to say that  $e$  explains the truth of  $p$ . Thus, if M5 is true, then if the truth of a proposition  $p$  is not even partly explained by what  $S$  does, then  $S$  has never had a choice about  $p$ . Here, two examples might be helpful.

First, laws of nature: Intuitively, nobody has a choice about the laws. But suppose that what laws obtain were partly explained by what acts you perform. (Perhaps a law is just a certain sort of exceptionless generalization; and perhaps your free acts at least partly explain what exceptionless generalizations of the relevant sort obtain.) If this were the case, it *might* be plausible to say that we have a choice about the laws. But, under the (more natural) assumption that our choices do not even partly explain what the laws of nature are, it is hard to see how we could possibly have a choice about the laws.

Second, divine decrees: Suppose that God has decreed that Sally will stand up at  $t$ . Does Sally have a choice about whether she stands up? That depends. Suppose that one of Sally's free acts partly explains God's decree. Perhaps God has eternally decreed that she will stand in (foreknowing) response to a prayer of Sally's that God will cause her to stand at  $t$ . In that case, it seems that Sally does have some choice about whether she stands at  $t$ . But, on the assumption that nothing that Sally does even partly explains God's decree, it seems wholly implausible to suppose that Sally has a choice about whether she stands. Of course, two examples hardly constitute an ironclad argument; but the principle seems sound nonetheless. If the truth of a proposition is not even partly explained by what you do, it is hard to see how you could possibly have a choice about its truth.

If that is right, however, then the crucial premise really is M3. In support of M3, I offer the following sub-argument: If  $P_S$  was true at  $t^*$ , then when  $t^*$  obtained, either  $P_S$  was true and grounded or it was true and ungrounded. Suppose its truth was ungrounded. Then, a fortiori, it was not grounded in

any event involving Sally or in any exercising of her agent-causal power. On the other hand, suppose its truth was grounded. Necessarily, no truth is grounded in or explained by something that does not exist and has never existed. How could something possibly be explained by what has never been? Thus, if  $P_S$  was true and grounded when  $t^*$  obtained, then the truth of  $P_S$  was grounded in something (like  $E_S$ ) that existed or occurred when or before  $t^*$  obtained. But if presentism is true, no event involving Sally, and no exercising of her agent causal power, had ever existed when or before  $t^*$  obtained. Therefore, if presentism is true, and if  $P_S$  was true and grounded when  $t^*$  obtained, then the truth of  $P_S$  at  $t^*$  was not grounded in any event involving Sally, or in any exercising of her agent-causal power. Thus, M3 is true.

I have now said all that I have to say in defence of the premises of the Main Argument. I want to close this section with a brief observation about backward causation. Note that attention to facts about grounding (which play a more important role in my Main Argument than is normal in the literature on fatalism) helps to highlight the reason why there is dispute about whether one would have to endorse backward causation in order to resist the fatalist. As I have already indicated, on eternalism, the property  $G_S$  involved in the grounding event  $E_S$  will be a relational property like *standing in the earlier-than relation to the event of Sally's standing at  $t$* . Thus, by standing, Sally makes it the case that  $G_S$  is exemplified, and so she makes it the case that  $E_S$  occurs. It is her act, therefore, that explains the truth at  $t^*$  of  $P_S$ . And to say that Sally *could have* made it the case that  $P_S$  was false isn't to ascribe some mysterious backward causal power to Sally. Rather, it's just to say that Sally could have refrained from standing at  $t$ , and *if she did*, objects existing at  $t^*$  would have had some different relational properties. On presentism, however, if Sally were to refrain from standing at  $t$ , she would bring it about that some past object or event had a different intrinsic character than it in fact did. As we'll see in the next section, it is hard to see how, on presentism, Sally could do this, even if backward causation is in principle possible. But my point here is simply that if she were to do this, she would be exercising causal power over the past.

## V. Responses

How shall a presentist respond to the Main Argument? My own view, obviously enough, is that the right response for presentists is to accept one of the disjuncts I have offered. To drive that recommendation home, however, I must explain why several alternative responses ought to be set aside. The three that I will consider are these: (i) endorse backward causation; (ii) reject the demand for grounds; and (iii) endorse the claim that Sally does indeed have a choice about what was true in her distant past despite the fact that she has no causal power over the past. I'll take each in turn.

*Response 1: Backward Causation.* Suppose the presentist endorses the possibility of backward causation. One might think this to be a promising line of reply because, so it initially appears, if backward causation is possible, then it might be open to the presentist to say that Sally's standing is a cause of  $E_S$ ,

the event that grounds the truth of  $P_S$ . And if this were so, then (*contra* M3), Sally's standing could itself be a partial ground for the truth of  $P_S$ .

In fact, however, backward causation is of no use to a presentist. After all, the presentist believes that, when  $t^*$  was present, neither Sally nor her standing existed; so, for the presentist, neither Sally nor her standing could have been among the causes of  $E_S$ . Likewise, now that  $t$  is present,  $E_S$  does not exist and so is not available to stand in causal relations. Thus, no event at  $t^*$  can be among the effects of Sally's standing and no event involving Sally can be among the causes of  $E_S$ . Indeed, we can say more generally that, on presentism, no event *outside of*  $t^*$  can, strictly speaking, be among the causes of any event that occurs at  $t^*$ . The reason, quite simply, is that to posit such relations is to suppose that existing things stand in relations with non-existing things—which, in turn, is to suppose, nonsensically, that there *are* some non-existing things.<sup>18</sup> So even if the presentist asserts that backward causation is possible, she will have to accommodate backward causation in the same way that she accommodates forward causation—namely, without positing cross-temporal dependence relations. But then she still lacks the resources for making strict and literal sense of the claim that the event of Sally's standing at  $t$  is causally responsible for  $E_S$ .

*Response 2: Rejecting the Demand for Grounds.* What about rejecting the demand for grounds altogether? Consider the debate about whether there are true counterfactuals of freedom (propositions of the form 'If (non-actual) circumstances  $C$  were to obtain,  $S$  would freely do  $A$ '). Opponents of true counterfactuals of freedom often say that there are no such truths because there is nothing in the world to ground them [cf., e.g., Adams 1977]. In response to this objection, Alvin Plantinga has made the following remark:

It seems to me much clearer that some counterfactuals of freedom are at least possibly true than that the truth of propositions must, in general, be grounded.  
[Plantinga 1985: 378]

William Lane Craig offers even stronger words:

I think it is evident that [those who reject the claim that there are true counterfactuals of freedom] have not even begun to do the necessary homework in order for their grounding objection to fly. They have yet to articulate their ontology of truth, including the nature of truth-bearers and truth-makers. Nor have they yet presented a systematic account of which truth-bearers require truth-makers.

[Craig 2001: 348]

On their view, the demand for grounds for counterfactuals of freedom is unmotivated. Or, at any rate, it has not been *sufficiently* motivated to

<sup>18</sup>At any rate, I say that it is nonsense to suppose that there are nonexistent objects. Neo-Meinongians, of course, disagree; but I am happy concede that presentists can avoid my argument if they embrace neo-Meinongianism. But the only alternative, it would seem, is to suppose that causal relations obtain not between events or objects existing at different times but rather between simultaneously exemplified properties or simultaneously occurring events [cf. Zimmerman 1997].

overthrow the antecedent conviction that there are true counterfactuals of freedom. (Indeed, on Craig's view, it has not even been adequately articulated.) And likewise, one might say, for the corresponding claim about future tense propositions about human free acts. Perhaps they simply do not require grounds. If so, then the account of grounding that drives the argument in Section IV may be rejected, and the demand to replace it with an alternative account of grounding may be rejected as well.

Whether the demand for grounds can sensibly be rejected is an interesting and difficult question, but it would take us too far afield to pursue that question here. For now, let us simply concede that the demand can sensibly be rejected. The question for our purposes is whether rejecting that demand is of any *use* to the presentist. Unfortunately, it is hard to see how it would be. Importantly, the response poses no direct threat to any premise of the argument. The hope would have to be that giving up the demand for grounds would somehow force a reformulation of the argument that would expose a flaw. But that hope is in vain. For the Sub-argument for M3 explicitly considers the possibility that  $P_S$  might be ungrounded, and it points out that, if  $P_S$  was true but ungrounded when  $t^*$  obtained, then its truth did not depend on any event involving Sally or on any exercise of her agent-causal power, and so M3 is true. Indeed, if the demand for grounds is given up, it looks as if the presentist must say that  $P_S$  was simply a *brute fact* at  $t^*$ . To see why, it will help to make a comparison with present tense truths.

Suppose it is true now that Sally stands up. A deflationist about truth can say that the state of affairs *it's being true that Sally stands up* is 'ungrounded' because that state of affairs is nothing more than—indeed, is identical with—the state of affairs *Sally's standing up*. On this view, the notion of truth isn't to be cashed out in terms of correspondence; so, one might argue, talk of grounding makes no sense. But even if that is right, the present truth of 'Sally stands up' is clearly not *brute*. Insofar as the *event* has an explanation, the truth of the sentence reporting its occurrence has an explanation. But a presentist deflationist cannot say this about  $P_S$ . *That* proposition's being true cannot be identified with any event involving Sally; for again, on presentism, Sally isn't around at  $t^*$  to be involved in events. Moreover, the only event that the proposition's truth can be identified with— $E_S$ —has no apparent cause and, apparently, no other sort of explanation. But then the truth of  $P_S$  seems just to be a brute fact; and, if it is, then it is not the sort of thing that anybody could possibly have a choice about.

*Response 3: Having a Choice about the Past.* Suppose a presentist says something like this: Sally's choices are among the causal explanations of her behaviour at  $t$ ; there are worlds in which her choices do not cause her to stand at  $t$ ; and in those worlds,  $E_S$  does not occur at  $t^*$ . Therefore, Sally has a choice about whether  $E_S$  occurs and thus about whether  $P_S$  was true when  $t^*$  obtained. Therefore, M6 is false.

This response is tempting, I think, because it parallels a response that compatibilists can give to a familiar argument for the conclusion that freedom is incompatible with causal determinism. According to the incompatibilist, we have no choice about the laws or about the (present tense) facts about times in our distant past; but, according to determinism,

the laws together with the present tense facts about some time in our distant past entails our present behaviour. Thus, concludes the incompatibilist, we have no choice about our present behaviour. ‘But’, the compatibilist replies, ‘our present behaviour is caused by our choices; there are worlds in which our choices do not cause us to behave as we are presently behaving; in those worlds either the laws or the facts about the relevant time in the distant past are different; therefore, we have a choice either about the laws or about the facts about times in our distant past.’

Though I have some sympathy with this response (as wielded by the compatibilist), I think that incompatibilists should not be impressed by it. The reason is that, though the compatibilist hereby demonstrates that determinism is compatible with our having a choice *in some sense* about our present behaviour, it is not at all clear that her response shows that determinism is compatible with our having a choice *in the sense relevant to freedom* about our present behaviour. If this latter is conceded, then the compatibilist has scored a victory. But this is precisely what *must* be conceded if the parallel response to the argument of Section IV is to be successful. Incompatibilists, I think, will be reluctant to concede this. And since the Main Argument is given under the supposition of incompatibilism, that tells against the usefulness of this sort of response.

But even leaving this issue aside, there is a deeper and more compelling reason why the present response (unlike its compatibilist parallel) is useless against the Main Argument. At the heart of the present response (and its compatibilist parallel) is the idea that certain past-tense facts depend upon present events, such that had the present been different, certain features of the past would have been different as well. The trouble, however, is that the response makes sense only on the assumption that, not only the relevant *past-tense* facts, but also the corresponding *past present-tense facts* depend(ed) upon present events; and this latter assumption is unacceptable.

Let me illustrate: Consider the following two facts, the first of which obtained at  $t^*$  and the second of which obtains now:

F<sub>1</sub>: P<sub>S</sub> is true.

F<sub>2</sub>: P<sub>S</sub> was true at  $t^*$ .

Suppose one tries to say that F<sub>2</sub> depends on the event (E<sub>1</sub>) *Sally’s standing at t*. This makes sense only if, when  $t^*$  was present, F<sub>1</sub> depended on E<sub>1</sub>. For, intuitively, F<sub>2</sub> and F<sub>1</sub> ought to have, apart from the passage of time, *precisely the same ground*. If they do not, then, it seems, the facts about the past are bizarrely disconnected from the events that occurred in the past. But, of course, F<sub>1</sub> cannot depend on E<sub>1</sub> unless it is possible for existing things to stand in relations with non-existing things.<sup>19</sup> If that *is* possible, then the Main Argument is indeed unsound (and the flaw lies in the explicit

<sup>19</sup>Note the consequence of this line of reasoning: If presentism is true, and if it really is true that facts like F<sub>1</sub> and F<sub>2</sub> in general ought to have the same ground, then it looks as if all tensed facts will have to be grounded in *eternal time-indexed events*—events like *it’s being the case that Sally stands at t*, which might be said to occur at every time.

appeal in the Sub-Argument for M3 to the claim that only existing things have properties and stand in relations). But I take it that if it turns out that presentists are forced to abandon the principle that only existing things have properties and stand in relations, then presentism has been reduced to absurdity.

This concludes my survey of possible responses to the Main Argument. Again, the strength of that argument depends on the plausibility of M3, M5, and  $\beta_3$ , all of which seem to me to be unassailable. But if those premises are true, then the ultimate conclusion of this paper is unavoidable. If presentism is true, then we must give up either libertarianism or the unrestricted principle of bivalence.<sup>20</sup>

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