

Once Present, Now Past

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The puzzle posed by the past is this: it is not (because it is no more), but it is important (because it once was). It is difficult to see how we can do full justice to both of these intuitions: if something is not, how can it be important? If something is important, mustn't it in some sense *be*?

We can resolve this puzzle by relaxing one of the two intuitions. Perhaps, given its importance, the past in some sense *is*. Perhaps, given that it is no more, the past does not remain important.

Advocates of the first line of response owe us an account of what sense, if any, the past is no more. Advocates of the second line of response need to show us that we can make do without the past.

But neither line of response can capture the intuition I intend to press in what follows, that the importance of the past lies precisely in its *non-being*. We cannot, I will argue, make do without the past—we need it. And we cannot get what we need from it if we suppose that it in some sense *is*.

Two immediate qualifications are in order.

First, the intuition I intend to press is not an intuition about the past *simpliciter*, but an intuition about the past given that reality is *tensed*. I will say more below about that it means to say that reality is tensed, but I will not here attempt to defend the claim that it is.

Second, given the chance, I would press the same point about the future as I will here press about the past. But the future is more iffy than the past, and that leads to complications that would obscure my main point. So, in what follows, I will ignore the future.

Presentism and Austerity

The partisans of time often take it with such Spartan seriousness that they deny existence to virtually all of it—to all of it, in short, but the infinitesimal pulse of the present. [20, p. 458]

The view that the past is not (because it is no more) is associated with *presentism*—the view that only the present is real. Presentism looks to be an austere view, akin to mereological nihilism or nominalism. Presentists, as adherents to an austere metaphysic, seek ways of doing without. The nihilist seeks ways of doing without composite objects; the nominalist seeks ways of doing without universals; the presentist seeks ways of doing without the past.

So far, I have been using “the past” as shorthand. When the presentist seeks to do without the past, she seeks to do two things.

First, and most obviously, seeks to do without past things—things that once existed but do not now exist. There appear to be many such things, some of them rather important: Socrates, the Roman Empire, Nixon, Watergate. But the presentist holds that the whole of reality is present reality, and past things are not part of present reality, so the presentist must deny this appearance.

The presentist also seeks to do without past facts. There appear to be many such facts, some of them rather important, for example, Nixon’s instantiation of the property *being President*. But the presentist holds that the whole of reality is present reality, and such facts are not part of present reality—things only instantiate the properties they presently instantiate—so the presentist must deny this appearance.

A radical presentist might embrace the austerity of her view wholeheartedly: the past is an illusion; tranquility comes to those who give it up.

Few presentists are radical presentists of this sort. A less radical position points to the traces of the past that have filtered into the present. The effects of Watergate are still with us; perhaps that is enough? And if Watergate had had no effects? Perhaps, then, we could give it up?¹

This remains a radical position, requiring that we give up completely on vast chunks of history. Perhaps it helps to suggest that quasi-acceptance of the past is consistent with its denial. What is quasi-acceptance? Markosian [12] suggests that, while it is not the case that there *is* someone named ‘Nixon’ who was President, it is the case that there was someone named ‘Nixon’ who was President. And while the second fact is not equivalent to the first (consider the difference between knowing that there is someone who could love you and knowing that, while there is no such person, there could be), perhaps it is close enough. Close enough for what, exactly? Close enough to ease us into accepting a radical position that forces us to give up vast chunks of history.

Presentists who lack the taste for this sort of radical denial have an alternative: they can insist that the past always leaves behind a “perfect record”, so the present contains a complete trace of everything that has ever been, and everything that has ever been the case.² This need not be a concrete record consisting in causal traces: it could be a record encoded in the properties presently

¹[12, 11]

²For “perfect records” [see 17].

instantiated by uninstantiated haecceities, or the color blue, or the world as a whole.³ Or it could consist in some set of relations among sets of propositions describing everything that has ever happened. Or it could consist in some giant unstructured present fact.

The key point, for the presentist's purposes, is that this record be a part of the present, and that, when it comes to worrying about the past, it suffices to worry about the record. Presentism, on this view, is a cheap kind of austerity: you give a lot up, but you trade it in for something else that is just as good.⁴

A lot hinges here on the claim that what you get—the presently existing record—is just as good as what you gave up. And here is where the problem arises: the present record is not the past, but a semblance of the past; as a semblance of the past, there is important work that it cannot do.

For presentists, the need for this work arises from the fact that, as presentists, they must also be *tensers*.

Tensing

A *tenser* holds that some fundamental facts—some of the facts that constitute reality—are temporary facts. A *detenser* denies this. Temporary facts are also called *tensed* facts. Facts that are not temporary—*tenseless* facts—are either permanent facts or atemporal facts.⁵

A modal analogy is helpful here. A *modalist* holds that some of the fundamental facts are contingent facts, and an *antimodalist* denies this. Facts that are not contingent are either necessary facts or a-modal facts.⁶

It is natural to assume that reality consists in some things that have some properties and stand in some relations. If so, then a subset of the fundamental facts will be the ontological facts—the facts about what there is. Some tensors, including presentists, hold that these facts are among the temporary facts, because they hold that things can come into or go out of existence. Other tensors are eternalists: they hold that the ontological facts are permanent or tenseless.⁷

Modalism and tensing are not defined by a commitment to modal or tense operators.⁸ They are, in the first instance, metaphysical views, not views about what sort of linguistic devices are needed to express those metaphysical views. Modalism starts from a commitment to real contingent facts. Tensing starts from a commitment to real temporary facts. Perhaps these commitments will lead to a commitment to primitive sentential operators. If so, the understanding

³[1, 2, 6]

⁴add reference to [2]

⁵note about the labels, serious tensing, etc.

⁶Quine, Lewis, and Sider are antimodalists; Stalnaker, Adams, Plantinga, and Fine are modalists.

⁷[see 21]

⁸In this respect, my definitions depart from those given in [7].

of these operators should be derived from the underlying metaphysical commitments, not vice versa.

I hope that it is obvious that presentists detensers are not worth taking seriously. The present facts are temporary facts: I am sitting, but I have not always been sitting and I won't always be sitting. So if reality is constituted by the present facts, reality is constituted by temporary facts.

Tensing and the Past

It remains to be shown that, if reality is tensed, there is work to be done by the genuine past that cannot be done by any presently existing semblance of the past. The point is actually more general than that: if reality is tensed, there is work to be done by the genuine past that cannot be done by any *existing* semblance of the past, whether present or not.

Because the point is more general, it will be convenient to begin by making the point in the context of a non-presentist tensor view—the “Moving Spotlight” theory of time—and then extending the point out from there.

The Motion of Spotlights

According to the *Moving Spotlight* theory of time, most facts are permanent.⁹ Reality consists of a series of permanently existing events, permanently ordered from earlier to later. And for the most part, these events instantiate their properties permanently. As McTaggart says,

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. [15, p. 13]

The only tensed facts, on this view, are facts concerning which events are past, present, and future. These facts change as the property *being present* “moves” down the series of events, “somewhat like the spot of light from a policeman’s bull’s-eye traversing the fronts of the houses in a street” [4, p. 59].

When thinking about the temporariness of reality, given that it is tensed, it can be helpful to make use of less temporary representations of reality—representations that capture how things are as of a given moment. Imagine that, at a given moment, you decide to record all that there is to record about reality: everything

⁹The view sketched below closely matches McTaggart’s famous description of the A-series [15, pp. 10-13].

there is, and all the properties and relations those things stand in. I'll call such a record a *snapshot*.¹⁰

On a tenseless theory, you'd get the same snapshot no matter when you took it, in much the same way that you'd get the same map of the United States no matter where you were when you drew it up. This is because on a tenseless theory, the fundamental facts are not temporary: they don't vary with time.

But on a tensed theory, you'll get a different snapshot depending on when you "take it". For example, assuming the Moving Spotlight theory is correct, if we take a snapshot right now, we will get something like this:

Snapshot 1: Moving Spotlight Theory

$$\dots E_1 \rightarrow \mathbf{E}_2 \rightarrow E_3 \rightarrow E_4 \dots$$

In Snapshot 1, we see a series of events, E_1 through E_4 . The arrows between them indicate the earlier-to-later relations that hold between them.¹¹ The use of boldface indicates which event—in this case, E_2 —has the property *being present*.

But now suppose, having waited a moment, we take a second snapshot. We will get something like this:

Snapshot 2: Moving Spotlight Theory

$$\dots E_1 \rightarrow E_2 \rightarrow \mathbf{E}_3 \rightarrow E_4 \dots$$

The property *being present* "sweeps" along the series of events, and our new snapshot reflects this: E_2 no longer instantiates the property being present; it has lost that property, and E_3 instantiates it instead.

Snapshots 1 and 2 are not just two different pictures of the same underlying reality as seen from two different perspectives. As representations of how things are, they contradict each other. According to Snapshot 1, E_2 , but not E_3 , has the property being present. According to Snapshot 2, E_3 , but not E_2 , has the property being present. So they can't both be right—at least, not together.¹² But if the world is tensed, then it can be the case that, first, one of them gets things right, but then things change, so that now, the second one gets things right. Assuming that the Moving Spotlight theory is correct, this is precisely what happens, and our two snapshots accurately reflect this.

¹⁰My "snapshots" are essentially the same as Storrs McCall's "universe-pictures" [13, p. 340].

¹¹The snapshot suggests a discrete rather than continuous sequence of events, but nothing in what follows hinges on that.

¹²but see [8].

The Once Present and the Now Past

Now, just looking at Snapshot 2, there is an obvious account to be given of what it is for an event to be past: an event is past just in case it bears the *earlier-than* relation to some event which instantiates the property *being present*. So, in particular, given this account, E_2 is past, because it bears the *earlier than* relation to E_3 , which instantiates the property *being present*.

This account of *being past* is “internal to the snapshot”: it appeals only to what properties and relations things instantiate, according to Snapshot 2: the instantiation of the *earlier than* relation between E_2 and E_3 , together with the instantiation of *being present* by E_3 .¹³

But there is a second way of thinking about what it is to be past in this context: E_2 is past because it once instantiated the property *being present*. Rather than considering the properties and relations E_2 has according to Snapshot 2, consider Snapshot 1: Snapshot 1 does not represent how things are, but it does represent how things once were. Consider, then, how things once were, and contrast that with how things are.

More precisely, given a Moving Spotlight Theory, there are two accounts available for what it is for an event to be past:

The now-past E_2 is past iff it is earlier than an event that has the property *being present*.

The once-present E_2 is past iff it instantiated the property *being present*.

The first account—the now-past—treats the past in terms of how things are: in terms of the properties (and relations) E_2 has. The second conception—the once-present—treats the past in terms of how things were: in terms of the properties E_2 had.

Which of these is the “genuine past”? It seems clear that the once-present is the genuine past: the now-past is trace of the once-present.¹⁴ But my argument here does not depend on this. What I wish to establish is that there is important work that cannot be done by the now-past, and can only be done by the once-present.

¹³I will tend to use ‘current’ and ‘present’ differently. In a non-presentist tensed world, it will usually be the case that there currently are more things than there presently are, because the present is thought of as being just one part of the current state of the world as represented by the current snapshot. In a presentist tensed world—the kind of view I will ultimately advocate—this distinction between the current and the present collapses. But we need it when we consider tensed theories in general.

¹⁴for more on this, see [18].

Deviant Tensed Structures

To see this, we need to consider situations in which the now-past and the once-present come apart. The Moving Spotlight Theorist should maintain that this can't happen: every event which is now-past was once-present. The challenge she faces is to make good on this claim—to show that she can rule out these deviant structures. My claim is that she can only do so by appealing to the once-present.

Suppose the world is as described by the Moving Spotlight theory, except that the property *being present*, as it sweeps down the series of events, skips over E_2 . So E_2 is now-past—it is earlier than some event which is present—but it never instantiated the property *being present*, so it is not once-present.

A snapshot taken when E_3 is present will look like this:

Snapshot 2: Skip-a-Day

$$\dots E_1 \rightarrow E_2 \rightarrow \mathbf{E}_3 \rightarrow E_4 \dots$$

This snapshot looks exactly the same as the Snapshot we imagined taking when E_3 was present, given the Moving Spotlight theory. The difference between that case—the case in which E_2 is both now-past and once-present—and this deviant case—the case in which E_2 is now-past but was not once-present—is not a difference that shows up in the snapshot taken when E_3 is present.

Suppose we ask the Moving Spotlight theorist to explain how her view differs from this odd Skip-a-Day view. What can she say? The difference does not appear to lie in how things are—as represented by the current snapshots. But how things are, as represented by the current snapshots, is suppose to be the whole of reality.

But the difference is a real difference and an important difference. It is a real and important difference that requires, for its explanation, that one reach beyond what is real and point to what was real but no longer is. It is an important difference that must be explained by pointing to that past, understood not in terms of some currently existing semblance of the past (i.e., the now-past), but to the no longer existing genuine past.

It is easy to multiply these examples.

Suppose someone insists that events earlier than 6000 years ago exist, and are earlier than subsequent events, but denies that those events ever instantiated the property *being present*? Is the Moving Spotlight theorist a (slightly heterodox) Young Earth Creationist of this sort? To establish that she is not, she must point beyond the (temporary) sum total of reality, to a sum total of reality that no longer is.

Suppose that $E_{1.5}$ —an event between E_1 and E_2 —instantiates *being present* for a moment in the usual way. But when $E_{1.5}$ stops instantiating *being present* it

ceases to exist, and ceases to stand in any relations to any other events. Once again the sum total of reality as of E_3 will match that posited by the Moving Spotlight theory. Once again, the Moving Spotlight theorist cannot rule out this sort of behavior without pointing beyond how things are.

Someone might say that, since the deviant tensed structures I have described are metaphysically impossible, they can safely be ignored. But exactly what is it that makes them metaphysically impossible? It is not metaphysically impossible that things be as they are represented as being in any given Snapshot. The metaphysical impossibility—if it is one—lies in the connections between what is represented in one snapshot and what is represented in another. But this sort of connection is precisely what cannot be captured in single snapshot. (There can be a semblance or record of this connection, but that simply pushes the problem back: what guarantees that it is an accurate semblance or record?)

Static Structures

In addition to deviant tensed structures, there are tenseless structures that the Moving Spotlight theorist cannot rule out unless she points beyond how things are.

There is nothing to stop a detenser from proposing that a particular event is special: it has a property that no other events have. Suppose this detenser calls this property the property *being present*, and asserts that E_3 is the only event that has it:

Snapshot of a Tenseless Series with a Frozen Present

$$\dots E_1 \rightarrow E_2 \rightarrow \mathbf{E}_3 \rightarrow E_4 \dots$$

How can the Moving Spotlight theorist distance herself from this character? It is hard to see how, short of reaching beyond how things and discussing how things were.¹⁵

It is natural to suppose that *being present* can only be had in a tensed or temporary way: nothing can be permanently present. Some have denied this: McTaggart thought that the last moment of time would be remain permanently present [14]; some theologians claim that God enjoys a life lived in a permanent present [10].

But this response won't work if the aim is to avoid pointing beyond reality. To see this, ask yourself what it is about the property *being present* that accounts for its tensed nature. The only plausible answer invokes the once-present: unlike *being zero*, or *being the death of Elvis*, *being present* isn't the kind of property

¹⁵This example is given by [19, p. 22]. In the passage, Sider's aim is to show that a Growing Block theorist is committed to two tenses, one of which corresponds to my once-present, the other, my now-past.

that a thing can have permanently. Indeed, it is part of what it is to be the property *being present* that events which once instantiated *being present* don't anymore and events which once failed to instantiate being present now do. In other words, what accounts for the tensed nature of *being present* is precisely its connection to the once-present. So we cannot avoid appeal to the once-present by resting weight instead on the tensed nature of *being present*.

Analogous remarks apply to *being earlier* than. It might be true that *being earlier than* is, like *being present*, by its very nature an indicator of a tensed structure.¹⁶ Indeed, one plausible account of the earlier to later ordering of events, given a Moving Spotlight Theory, is that it just is the ordering induced by the movement of *being present*. On this account, what makes it the case that E_1 is earlier than E_2 just is the fact that E_1 once instantiated *being present* and E_2 now instantiates *being present*.

Perhaps this is the right account for a Moving Spotlight theorist to give of the *earlier to later* relation. But it won't get her out of my dilemma: far from providing a way of doing without appeal to the once-present, this account makes the appeal to the once-present even more pervasive than one may have initially thought. In effect, a Moving Spotlight theorist who makes this move is taking the first step toward eliminating the redundant semblance of a past that her view posits.

Presentism Again

The problems just raised for the Moving Spotlight theory apply with equal force to the Growing Block theory.¹⁷ The problem arises for any tensor, with respect to whatever aspect of reality she takes to be temporary.

Applying the moral to presentism is a bit trickier. Suppose the world is a presentist world—the only fundamental facts are present facts—and suppose we repeat our thought experiment, taking two snapshots. Suppose, for the sake of concreteness, that we take our first snapshot in 2006, and that we take our second snapshot in 2010. Ignoring everything but the presidential status of George W. Bush and Barack Obama, here is what we would find:

<i>being President</i>	
Bush	Obama

Table 1: Snapshot 1: Presentism (circa 2006)

¹⁶This seems to be the gist of McTaggart's criticism of Russell: according to Russell, the temporal order is a tenseless series of events from earlier to later. But, McTaggart argues, that relation can't be the temporal relation of earlier to later unless it is properly connected with real change (i.e., tensed instantiation) with respect to properties like being present [15, p. 14].

¹⁷see [19, 3, 9, 16]

<i>being President</i>	
Bush	Obama

Table 2: Snapshot 2: Presentism (circa 2010)

According to Snapshot 1, Bush instantiates the property *being President*, and Obama does not. According to Snapshot 2, Obama instantiates *being President* and Bush does not.

For both the Moving Spotlight Theory and the Growing Block Theory, there were obvious materials in the current snapshot out of which to define a surrogate past. But in these presentist snapshots, there are no such materials. In the 2010 snapshot, for example, there is nothing that corresponds to the fact that Bush was President.

But presentists are adept at inflating the present to forgo the costs of their austerity. There are several ways to do this, but I'll consider here just one: *tensed properties presentism*.¹⁸ The tensed properties presentist introduces “tensed properties”, like the property *having been President*, into the mix.

It is called “tensed” not because it is a property that is only temporarily instantiated, but because our description of the property makes use of past tensed verb. This is an unfortunate confusion of terminology, but I don't know of any easy way to repair it. *having been President* is a past-oriented tensed property. Many presentists also make use of future-oriented tensed properties, like *going to be President*.

Once tensed properties are on the table, we once again have two ways of thinking about the past. On the one hand, we can think about the past in terms of the properties things instantiated: Bush, for example, instantiated *being President*. On the other hand, we can think about the past in terms of the tensed properties things now instantiate: Bush, for example, now instantiates the property *having been President*.

According to the tensed property presentist, then, our snapshots will have a bit more information:

<i>being President</i>	<i>going to be President</i>
Bush	Obama

Table 3: Snapshot 1: Tensed Properties Presentism (circa 2006)

But the same problems arise for this view as arose for the analogous non-presentist views. What is it about Snapshot 2 that guarantees that Snapshot 1 is an accurate representation of how things once were? In other words, what is

¹⁸Tensed property presentists include ...

<i>having been President</i>	<i>being President</i>
Bush	Obama

Table 4: Snapshot 2: Tensed Properties Presentism (circa 2010)

it about Bush’s now instantiating the property *having been President* that tells us that he once instantiated the property *being President*?

I admit that this may sound like a strange question. Given that:

- (1) Bush instantiates the property *having been President*

how could it not be that:

- (2) Bush instantiated the property *being President*.

After all, (1) and (2) look like two ways of saying the same thing.

But (1) and (2) only look like two ways of saying the same thing because of the label being used for the tensed property. To properly assess the relation between (1) and (2), we need to get past the label, and see what is actually involved in ascribing *having been President* to somebody.

I see three accounts that could be given of *having been President*.

First, *having been President* could be taken as a simple primitive property, so that the verbal complexity in the predicate is misleading. Given such an account, it does not seem that (1) and (2) are just two ways of saying the same thing. Indeed, it seems that, given such an account, we can imagine deviant tensed structures, in which the present instantiation of *having been President* comes apart from the past instantiation of *being President*. Suppose that, while Bush now bears the property having been President, back in 2006, John Kerry was enjoying his first term in office, so that he, not Bush, instantiated the property *being President*. A Tensed Properties Presentist can rule out such possibilities, I say, only if she asserts that (1) entails (2): only if she says that the tensed properties that Bush now instantiates must reflect the ordinary properties that Bush once instantiated.

A second option would be to suppose that *having been President* is a complex property that, at least partially, must be accounted for in terms of its relation to the past instantiation of *being President*. *Being a scar* is probably a property like this. To be a scar is a complicated affair, involving not just how things are now, but how things were, as is clear from the fact that a “snapshot” may not capture, for example, the difference between a scar and a congenital birth defect. But of course, if *having been President* is to be understood like that,

then appealing to its present instantiation is no way to avoid appeal to past instantiation.¹⁹

The third option I see—the option I find most plausible—is to say that *having been President* stands in for a complex predicate, whose satisfaction requires, not that Bush now instantiate any property at all, but only that he once instantiated the property *being President*. To treat *having been President* this way is to treat it in the way that it is natural to treat *being dead*. To be dead, most of us think, is not to instantiate some property now, but to have instantiated the property *being alive* once but no longer. If tensed properties are understood in this way, then there is no possibility that (1) and (2) will come apart. Indeed, this way of understanding *having been President* is the only one of the three that vindicates the initial sense that (1) and (2) are just two different ways of saying the same thing. But, of course, the ascription of a tensed property, so understood, isn't really the ascription of a property at all. The property *having been President*, so understood, shouldn't show up in the current snapshot, because the claim that Bush has the property *having been President* turns out, upon analysis, just to be the claim that he once instantiated the property *being President*, not a claim about any property that he now instantiates.

So I think we can safely conclude that Tensed Properties Presentism cannot be used as a way to avoid appeal to past instantiation.

Redundancy

We have seen several theories that posit, in addition to or instead of the genuine past, which no longer is, some semblance of the past, which is. We have seen that this semblance of the past cannot do all of the work that the genuine past needs to do. This suggests that there is no compelling reason to posit an existing semblance of the past: to the extent we can make use of it, it will be redundant.

This gives us a reason to prefer presentism over other tensed theories. But it also gives us a reason to forgo the dominant presentist project, of trying to show how to make do without the past. On the contrary, it suggests that, insofar as we wish to be tenses, we need to find a way to become comfortable pointing beyond reality.

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