

# Once Present, Now Past

David Sanson

2010–10–15

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

## Introduction

Many philosophers think that reality is static. The basic questions—what is there? how are things?—have permanent or timeless or eternal answers, because reality itself is permanent or timeless or eternal.<sup>1</sup> To suppose otherwise is to treat an aspect of our perspective on reality as though it were a feature of reality itself. Fundamental metaphysics, on this view, traffics in a pure realm of permanent objects and permanent facts.<sup>2</sup>

Some of us think instead that reality is dynamic. Those basic questions—what is there? how are things?—do not have permanent or timeless answers, because, as time passes, things come into

---

1. Throughout this paper, I will make free use of the concept of *reality*. This will, I suspect, raise some hackles. But, with Kit Fine, I am convinced that, when it comes to the issues at hand, “essential appeal must be made to the concept of reality” (2005, p. 261), and so I do so without apology.

2. I will not make any distinction between *permanent*, *timeless*, and *eternal* in this paper, though no doubt there are distinctions to be made. The view that reality is static in the sense just described is also known as the *tenseless* theory of time or the *B-theory*; permanent or timeless or eternal facts are also known as *tenseless* facts; proponents of the view are also known as *de-tensers* or *B-theorists*.

and go out of existence, gain and lose properties, join into and break off relations. Fundamental metaphysics, on this view, is ensnared in a messy flux of temporary objects and temporary facts.<sup>3</sup>

The view that reality is dynamic has consequences for how we think about past, present, and future. The quote from Prior above suggests the basic picture: what is real is present, what was real, but is no longer real, is past, and what will be real, but is not yet real, is future.

Here I want to try to spell out one of those consequences: if reality is dynamic, I argue, the past is both explanatorily ineliminable—it does work that nothing else can do—and unreal. These are not two independent claims: to do the explanatory work we need it to do, the past must not be real.

## **Contingent Reality, Temporary Reality, and Real Change**

Most of us think that reality is contingent. And, more specifically, most of us think that there are contingent objects—objects that exist but might not have—and that there are contingent facts—facts that are the case but might not have been the case.

So, for example, Barack Obama exists, and he is the 44th President of the United States, but both his existence and his being 44th President are contingent.

Many of us are also willing to go a step further: it is not just that the existing things exist contingently, but that other things could have existed instead. And it is not just that what is the case might not have been, but that something else might have been the case instead.

---

3. The view that reality is dynamic in the sense just described is also known as the *tensed* theory of time or the *A-theory*; temporary facts are also known as *tensed* facts; proponents of the view are also known as *tensers* (or, sometimes, *serious tensers* or *A-theorists*).

So, for example, there are no purple cows, but there could have been purple cows, even though (plausibly) no (actually) existing thing could have been a purple cow.

Just as most of us think that reality is contingent, many of us think that reality is temporary. And, more specifically, we think that there are temporary objects—objects that exist but did not exist or will not exist—and that there are temporary facts—facts that are the case but once were not the case and soon will not be the case.<sup>4</sup>

So, for example, Barack Obama exists, and he is President of the United States, but both his existence and his being President are temporary.

And many of us are also willing to go a step further: it is not just that the existing things exist temporarily, but that other things once existed and yet other things will exist. And it is not just that some of the facts that are the case were not the case and will not be the case, but that some other facts were once the case and some other facts will be the case.

---

4. As mentioned above, temporary facts are also called *tensed* facts. Various reasons have been given for avoiding this label. Zimmerman, for example, argues that “tense is clearly a linguistic category” and so should not be applied to metaphysical facts (2005, p. 405). Perhaps so. I avoid the label for a different reason: in the literature, it has become ambiguous. A tensed fact is, in one sense, a temporary fact. But in another sense, a tensed fact is a fact the expression of which makes ineliminable use of linguistic tenses, as, according to some, the fact that George W. Bush was President (indeed, tensed facts in this sense will come up in this paper). Perhaps it is this second sense of ‘tensed fact’ that gives rise to Zimmerman’s worry that are blending language and metaphysics in illegitimate ways.

So, for example, there are no dinosaurs, but there were dinosaurs, even though (plausibly) no (presently) existing thing was a dinosaur. And while it is not now the case that George W. Bush is President of the United States, it was the case: that was once a fact but it no longer is.

These modal analogies are helpful; I suspect they are helpful in both directions. I will argue in this paper that our commitment to the primitive use of tensed idioms is driven by—and should be understood in terms of—a more fundamental commitment to the view that reality is temporary. I suspect something similar is true in the metaphysics of modality: the “friend of boxes and diamonds” is first a friend of contingency: her commitment to the primitive use of modal idioms is driven by—and should be understood in terms of—a more fundamental commitment to the view that reality is contingent.<sup>5</sup>

But the analogies only go so far. One key difference between the contingent and the temporary seems to lie in the relation between temporariness and change. When we suppose that reality is temporary, we are supposing that reality *changes*. Perhaps there is a proper analogue of change in the case of contingency, but if so, it is not obvious.

We can, of course, talk about *variation* across possible worlds, and we can cash this out by drawing a contrast between how things are in our world and how things could be in some other world, just as, when we talk about change across time, we can cash it out by drawing a contrast between what was the case at some past time and what is the case now. But this formal similarity seems to paste over a metaphysical difference. In temporal case, the reason why things vary from time to time is that they change, and this has no obvious modal analogue.<sup>6</sup>

---

5. So I think Fine’s definition of *Modalism* fails to get at core of the view. (See (Fine 1977, p. 116)). “Friends of boxes and diamonds” is a quote from (Lewis 1986, p. 12).

6. So it would be a mistake to suppose that change *just is* difference over time.

Everyone—even those who think that reality is static—will allow that there is some sense in which things change. But consider some temporary fact—say, the fact that you are reading this sentence. Wait! That fact is no longer a fact, because you are no longer reading that sentence. Those who think that reality is static will treat what just happened as a mere phenomena, to be analyzed in terms of some underlying structure of permanent facts. But those of us who think that reality is temporary will take this, or things similar, at face value: some facts—perhaps that fact—really are temporary—here one minute, gone the next.

## **Restricted and Unrestricted Views**

*Growing Block Theorists* think that reality is dynamic. But they think that, when it comes to real change, there is an important asymmetry: as time passes, new things and facts come to be, but old things and facts never cease to be.<sup>7</sup> The universe, they say, has the structure of a four-dimensional space-time, consisting of all past and present things and facts, but no future things or facts. To be present, on this view, is to be among the most recent things or facts to have come to be. The temporally latest three-dimensional surface of the block is the present. As time passes—as new things and facts come to be—things and facts that once were present—once were on the “cutting edge” of reality—continue to exist even as they recede ever deeper into the block.

*Eternalist A-theorists* also think that reality is dynamic. Like the Growing Block Theorists, they put a restriction on real change. For them, however, the fundamental asymmetry is not between coming to be and ceasing to be, but between ontological change and alteration. Nothing ever comes into or goes out of existence, on their view; existence, they say, is timeless or eternal. But things do gain and lose properties.<sup>8</sup> So, for example, they will say that a past object, like Socrates, exists; but has lost most of the properties he once had, e.g., *being a philosopher*.

---

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

8. See, for example, (Williamson 1998, pp. 265—268).

Under the influence of McTaggart, a yet more restrictive version of Eternalist A-theory has been widely discussed: the *Moving Now Theory*. For the most part, the Moving Now Theorist rejects both real ontological change and real alteration. On her view, *most* instantiation is permanent; temporary instantiation is a privilege enjoyed only by those properties tied directly to temporal passage: *being past*, *being present*, and *being future*.<sup>9</sup> As time passes, each event or moment of time instantiates each of these properties in turn: first, it instantiates *being future*, then *being present*, then *being past*. Moreover, only one of these three properties—*being present*—is a property something can both gain and lose: *being future* can be lost but not regained; *being past* can be gained but not lost.

All three of these views face trouble if I can establish what I claim: that, given that reality is dynamic, the past must not be real. To the extent that such views posit a real past, I will argue, the past they posit cannot all the work that needs to be done. Once we introduce a past that can do that work, the real past that was posited becomes, at best, redundant.

In any case, it seems to me that once one has taken the plunge—once one has decided to embrace the view that reality is dynamic—these sorts of restrictions on real change should seem unnatur-

---

9. The following quote from McTaggart neatly encapsulates the view:

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

al. The most natural view in the area is a view that allows for unrestricted real change. It posits no asymmetric restriction between coming to be and ceasing to be, and no asymmetric restriction between ontological change and alteration. Objects come into and go out of existence, gain and lose properties: these are all real changes.

## **Presentism**

This position—call it *Unrestricted Real Change*—is closely associated with, but not identical to, *Presentism*. *Presentism* is the view that the present is the whole of reality: the only things that exist are things that presently exist, the only properties things have are properties things presently have, the only facts are present facts.

Taken by itself, Presentism is consistent with the view that reality is static: it does not entail that reality is temporary or that there is any real change. Many theists describe God's existence in just these terms: he lives in an eternal, unchanging present.<sup>10</sup>

Taken by itself, Presentism is also consistent with the sorts restrictions on fundamental change considered above. For example, a Presentist could maintain that the only things that exist are uncreated immortal souls, so that nothing ever comes into or goes out of existence, while allowing that these souls gain and lose properties. It is hard to differentiate this sort of Presentist position from Eternalist A-theory.

Similarly, a Presentist could maintain that that the only things that exist are created immortal souls, and that, over time, these souls accumulate, but never lose, properties. Again, it is hard to differentiate this sort of Presentist position from the Growing Block Theory.

But most Presentists intend, I think, to endorse Unrestricted Real Change.<sup>11</sup>

---

10. See, for example, (Leftow 2002).

If one ignores the Presentist's commitment to Unrestricted Real Change, it is natural to think of Presentism as an austere metaphysical view, of a kind with Nominalism and Mereological Nihilism. Indeed, a lot of the literature on Presentism reads this way: the project Presentists face is the project of finding a way to do without the past and future—to make do only with the present—in much the way that the project Nominalists face is the project of finding a way to do without universals—to make do only with particulars.

I think this emphasis is a mistake. The project facing Presentists is to make sense of the messy (ornate?) metaphysics of real change. The view that past and future are unreal should be seen as falling out of that project, and it is only when that is clearly in view that we should start thinking about where that leaves the status of past and future.

## **The Past**

So let us now return to the point I wish to defend: if reality is dynamic, the past is both explanatorily ineliminable and essentially unreal.

I will press the point first against the Moving Now Theory, and then extend the point to other positions, before turning around and using the point to support a particular form of Presentism.

---

11. Similar comments apply to the relation between the Growing Block Theory and *Pastism*—the view that only the past and present are real. In principle, a Pastist need not endorse any fundamental change, and so need not endorse the Growing Block Theory. (Pastism is such an obvious analogue to Presentism that it is surprising that it is rarely discussed in isolation from its associated dynamic commitments. One suspects this is an historical accident: the label 'Pastism', has never caught on despite occasional use. Armstrong (2004, p. 145) uses it, but remarks that it is an “unlovely” term.)



The only temporary 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” (Broad 1923, 59).

## Snapshots

Snapshots are useful heuristic devices for thinking about reality, given that it changes. A snapshot is a representation of “the sum total of reality”—everything there is and all the properties and relations things bear.<sup>12</sup>

If the world is static, snapshots taken at different times will be exactly the same. But if the world is dynamic, snapshots taken at different times will typically be different.

In particular, if the world is as the Moving Now Theorist would have it, then if were to “take” a snapshot right now, we would get something like this:

1. ...  $E_1 \rightarrow \mathbf{E}_2 \rightarrow E_3 \rightarrow E_4$  ...

(1) represents a series of events,  $E_1$  through  $E_4$ , ordered by the earlier-to-later relation that are represented by the arrows.<sup>13</sup> The use of boldface represents the instantiation of the property *being present*—in this case, by  $E_2$ .

Now suppose that, having waited a moment, we were to “take” a second snapshot. It would look something like this:

---

12. My “snapshots” are essentially the same as Storrs McCall’s “universe-pictures” (McCall 1976, p. 340).

13. (1) suggests a discrete rather than continuous sequence of events, but nothing in what follows hinges on that.

2. ...  $E_1 \rightarrow E_2 \rightarrow E_3 \rightarrow E_4$  ...

The property *being present* has moved down the series of events, and our new snapshot reflects this:  $E_2$  has lost the property *being present*; that property is now instantiated by  $E_3$  instead.

(1) and (2) are not just two different pictures of the same underlying reality, seen from two different perspectives. As representations of how things are, they contradict each other. According to (1),  $E_2$ , but not  $E_3$ , has the property *being present*. According to (2),  $E_3$ , but not  $E_2$ , has the property *being present*. So they can't both be right—at least, not together.<sup>14</sup> But if the world is dynamic, then it can and will be the case that, first, one of them gets things right, but then things change, so that later, the second one gets things right: each is accurate in succession. Assuming that the Moving Now Theory is correct, this is precisely what happened as we took our snapshots, and the difference between (1) and (2) provides an accurate record of this.

### Once Present and Now Past

Supposing (2) is now an accurate representation of how things are, it is clear that  $E_2$  is past.

Looking just at the facts represented by (2), there appears to be an obvious account of this:  $E_2$  is past because it bears the *earlier than* relation to  $E_3$ , and  $E_3$  is present. More generally, we can say that an event is past just in case it is earlier than the event that is present.

This account of what it is to be past appears to be in terms of the facts that are intrinsic to reality: it appeals only to what properties and relations things instantiate: the instantiation of the *earlier than* relation between  $E_2$  and  $E_3$ , and the instantiation of *being present* by  $E_3$ .

---

14. For development of the view that these two facts can, in some sense, obtain together, see (Fine 2005).

But there is a second way of thinking about what it is to be past in this context. It seems equally important—if not more important—to point out that  $E_2$  once instantiated the property *being present*. This account of  $E_2$ 's pastness does not appear to be intrinsic to reality: we are not now considering the properties and relations that things instantiate, as represented in (2). We are instead reaching beyond that, to consider how things were. Lest you've forgotten how things were, refer to (2): things were once just like that.

It will be useful to have two distinct labels for these apparently distinct accounts of the past:

**now-past**

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

**once-present**

an event is *once-present* iff it instantiated the property *being present*.

Which of these is the right way to think about the past? How are they related? I'd like to suggest that the right way to think about the past is in terms of the once-present: the now-past, if it is really distinct from the once-present, is only a symptom or semblance of the past.

But I'm also open to the suggestion that this distinction ultimately collapses: the now-past is not, despite initial appearances, distinct from the once-present. If so, the collapse is not symmetric: the now-past turns out to be, upon reflection, the once-present, and not vice versa.

**Pulling Apart the Pasts**

We need to consider situations in which the now-past and the once-present come apart. The Moving Now Theorist should maintain that such situations are impossible: every event which is now-past was once-present. But she cannot simply assert this: she must make good on it. To make good on it, she must explain why these situations are impossible. As we will see, she can only do so by appealing to the once-present.

Suppose the world is as described by the Moving Now Theory, except that the property *being present*, as it sweeps down the series of events, skips over  $E_2$ . Call this the Skip-a-Day Hypothesis.

On the Skip-a-Day Hypothesis, a snapshot taken when  $E_3$  is present will come out just the same as before—just as it came out when we took snapshot (2) above:

$$(3) \dots E_1 \rightarrow E_2 \rightarrow \mathbf{E}_3 \rightarrow E_4 \dots$$

There is no difference between (2) and (3), because the difference between supposing that the Moving Now Theory is correct and supposing that the Skip-a-Day Hypothesis is correct is not a difference that shows up in how things currently are.<sup>15</sup>

Indeed, given (3),  $E_2$  is now-past, since it is earlier than the event which is present. But, given the hypothesis,  $E_2$  was never present, so it is not once-present.

What can the Moving Now Theorist say to distinguish her theory from the Skip-a-Day Hypothesis? Since the difference does not lie in reality, she must, I'd suggest, pointing beyond her current reality, to how things were. To do so is to invoke the once-present. To do so is to admit that you cannot say everything you want to say about the past in terms of the now-past.

It is easy to multiply examples in this vein.

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

---

15. Note that I am forced to make a distinction between what is current and what is present. In a non-presentist dynamic world, what there currently is and what is currently the case exceeds what presently is and what presently is the case, because what there currently will include, for example, past things, and what is currently the case will include past facts. In a presentist dynamic world this distinction between the current and the present (thankfully) collapses.

any relations to any other events. Call this the Drop-a-Day Hypothesis. On this hypothesis, as on the Skip-a-Day Hypothesis, the snapshot taken when  $E_3$  is present will look just like (2). Once again, the Moving Now Theorist must point beyond her current reality, to how things were, invoking the once-present, making use of the past in a way that cannot be captured in terms of the now-past.

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*. The Moving Spotlight Theorist will want to distance herself from this (slightly heterodox) Young Earth Creationist Hypothesis. But to do so, she must, once again point beyond her current reality, to how things were, invoking the once-present, making use of the past in a way that cannot be captured in terms of the now-past.

These hypothesis all involve a certain kind of deviance. Current facts that one might have taken to record past events—the current set of relations among existing events—fail to do so. The Moving Now Theorist is invited to tell us that, contrary to these hypotheses, the current facts are an accurate record of what happened. But to do so, she must draw a connection between those current facts and facts that are no longer current, between what is real and what was real but is not. To draw that connection, she must point beyond what is real, to what was real. In so doing, it is essential that she not attempt to transmute what is not real into some still real trace or record, for if she does that, she will have simply pushed the problem back.

This is what I have in mind when I say that the past has an important explanatory role to play, and it cannot play that role unless it is not real.

## The Frozen Now

The sorts of deviance we have considered so far involve real changes and disconnect between those changes and whatever record remains of those changes in reality. But there is another kind of deviance that bears mention.

Suppose some particular event— $E_3$ , say—is special: it has a property that no other events have. And suppose it has this property permanently, not temporarily. Call this property ‘being frozent’, and represent it using italics:

4. ...  $E_1 \rightarrow E_2 \rightarrow E_3 \rightarrow E_4$  ...

(4) looks much the same as (2).<sup>16</sup> If there is any difference, it lies in the difference between *being present* and *being frozent*. What is this difference?

It is natural to suppose that *being present* can only be instantiated temporarily: nothing can be permanently present. But it is not obvious that this is so. McTaggart argued that the last moment of time, once it became present, would never cease to be present, because it would never become past.<sup>17</sup> By similar reasoning—though not reasoning McTaggart endorsed—one could argue that a first moment of time could never become present, because it never was future. But, putting these two arguments together, it would seem to follow that, if there were only a single moment of time, it would be eternally present. As has already been mentioned, some theists hold that this is the way we should think about divine eternity.

---

16. The specter of a frozen present is raised, but not addressed, in (Markosian 1993, p. 835 n.13). Sider, arguing against Tooley’s version of the Growing Block Theory, suggests that Tooley may have trouble distinguishing his growing universe from a static universe with a last moment of time unless he helps himself to two different “senses of the tenses” (2001, p. 22).

17. See (McTaggart 1909).

Put those issues aside, and grant that *being present*, by its very nature, is a property that can only be temporarily instantiated. This, if granted, gives the Moving Now Theorist the resources to distinguish (2) and (4). But is this distinction a distinction that is intrinsic to reality, or a distinction that involves pointing beyond reality?

The answer will depend on which we take to be more fundamental: temporariness or difference over time. I am inclined to think that the latter is more fundamental: if we want to understand what is meant by the claim that *being present* must be instantiated temporarily, we will have to consider a contrast between what is and what was present, or what is and what will be present. If that is correct, then the Moving Now Theorist's attempt to point to the fact that *being present* is a temporary property will involve pointing beyond reality.

In a similar vein, it might be that *being earlier than* is, like *being present*, by its very nature an indicator of a dynamic structure.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, one plausible account of the earlier to later ordering of events, given a Moving Now Theory, is that it just is the ordering induced by the movement of *being present* from one event to the next.<sup>19</sup> On this account, we can rule out the Skip-a-Day Hypothesis: an event that was never present will, *ipso facto*, not now be earlier than the event that is present.

But this does not mean that the Moving Now Theorist can point to the current instantiation of *earlier than* relations to rule out Skip-a-Day without pointing beyond reality. For now it turns out that *being earlier than* is not intrinsic to how things are, because the very account of what it is to

---

18. This seems to be the gist of McTaggart's criticism of Russell: according to Russell, events in time even though there are no temporary facts. But, McTaggart argues, the relation that orders the events is not the temporal relation of earlier to later unless at least some facts about the events are temporary facts (McTaggart 1927, p. 14).

19. see, for example, (Broad 1923, p. 81–82)

stand in the relation involves drawing a connection between what is real and what was, but no longer is, real.

Rather than suggesting a way of doing without the once-present, this move suggests a way of doing without the now-past: the very terms in which the now-past is defined have begun to dissolve into the once-present.

## **Presentism Again**

The point just made in the context of the Moving Now Theory applies with equal force to the Growing Block theory.<sup>20</sup> More generally, it applies to any Dynamic Theory—any theory that allows that there is real change.

So let's consider Presentism taken together with Unrestricted Real Change. Can we, as Presentists, make do only with the present, or must we point beyond the present to the no longer real past?

Suppose, for the sake of concreteness, that we take a snapshot in 2006, and then take a second snapshot now, in 2010. Ignoring everything but the presidential status of George W. Bush and Barack Obama, here is what we would find:

5. Bush: *being President*

Obama:

6. Bush:

Obama: *being President*

---

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



According to (5)—the snapshot taken in 2006—Bush instantiates the property *being President*, and Obama does not. According to (6)—taken in 2010—Obama instantiates *being President* and Bush does not.

Both the Moving Now Theory and the Growing Block Theory provide obvious materials in current reality in terms of which we can define a way of thinking about the past only in terms of how things are. Presentism does not. In (6), for example, there is nothing to suggest that Bush was President.

But presentists are adept at inflating the present so as to forgo the costs of their apparent austerity. There are several ways to do this.<sup>21</sup> Here I will consider two.

The first is *Tensed Properties Presentism*.<sup>22</sup> According to the Tensed Properties Presentist, our snapshots are two austere, for they fail to note the “tensed properties” of Bush and Obama, properties like *having been President* and *having been Senator*.

A tensed property, as understood by the Tensed Property Presentist, is not so-called because it is temporarily instantiated. It is instead so-called after the role that a past or future tense plays in our description of the property. For our purposes, we can confine our focus to past-tensed properties, as in the examples already given.

Once past-tensed properties are on the table, our snapshots become enriched. The snapshot taken in 2006 looks something like this:

7. Bush: *being President*                  Obama: *being going to be President*

---

21. (Keller 2004) surveys several of the options.

22. Few Presentists trumpet the fact that they are Tensed Properties Presentists, but the view is implicit in, for example, Bigelow’s claim that “it is a present property of the world, that it is a world in which Helen was abducted and the Trojans were conquered” (Bigelow 1996, 46).

8. Bush: *having been President*                      Obama: *being President*

With this enriched set of facts, we can once again introduce two ways of thinking about the past. On the one hand, we can think about the past in terms of the properties things once 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*.

And with these two ways of thinking about the past the possibility of deviance once again arises. What is it about Bush's now instantiating the property *having been President* that ensures us that he once instantiated the property *being President*?

Consider, for example, the following conspiracy theory: the Bush Presidency was a fraud. A snapshot taken in 2006 looks like this:

9. Gore: *being President*                      Bush:

Back then, it was Gore, not Bush, who had the property *being President*. But somehow Bush stole the Presidency from Gore *after the fact*: it is Bush who now has the property *having been President*, even though it was Gore who once had the property *being President*.

This is, of course, not what actually happened. But nothing in *the present*—even the Tensed Properties Presentist's inflated present—dictates that this is not what actually happened. The reassurance we need from the Tensed Properties Presentist concerns the connection between how things are—including the tensed properties things now have—and how things were. But that is a connection between what is real and what was, but no longer is, real: it involves pointing beyond reality.

I admit that this last bit of argumentation may sound strained. Given that

(A) Bush instantiates the property *having been President*,

it does not seem possible to suppose that

(B) Bush once instantiated the property *being President*,  
could be false. (A) and (B) look like two ways of saying the same thing.

Here we need to be careful. Are (A) and (B) two ways of saying the same thing? It depends on how we understand the property *having been President* and its relation to the property *being President*.

If we take *having been President* to be a fundamental property of its own, in no way metaphysically dependent upon the property *being President*, then (A) and (B) are not two ways of saying the same thing, and the argument given above goes through.

The alternative is to suppose that the two properties—or the instantiation of the two properties—is somehow related. If so, how so?

A natural proposal is that when someone instantiates the property *having been President*, he is standing in a relation—the *having been* relation—to the property *being President*. But how should we understand this relation?

The Presentist who wants to stay entirely within the Present will have to say that the relation is a relation that holds entirely in the present, between Bush and the property *being President*. But the moment we say that, the specter of deviance re-arises: Bush only stands in that relation to *being President* now if, back in 2006, he had the property *being President*. Once again, we are pointing beyond the present—pointing beyond reality—to the no longer real past.

The alternative is to suppose that the relation between Bush and the property *being President* is not properly understood as a relation that holds entirely in the present: the account of what that relation—*having been*—will take us beyond the present. So understood, Tensed Properties

Presentism ceases to be a strategy for inflating the present in order to avoid relying on the past. Instead, it just becomes an indirect way of relying on the past.

## **Priorian Presentism**

The Priorian Presentist, following the lead of Prior, seeks to understand the past not by introducing tensed properties into her account of reality, but by introducing tense operators into her account of reality. So, rather than saying that

(A) Bush instantiates the property *having been President*,

she instead says

(C) It was the case that (Bush instantiates the property *being President*).

If there is any view that fits with the considerations I have been pushing, it is Priorian Presentism. A sentence like (C) intended to express exactly the same thing as my (B),

(B) Bush instantiated the property *being President*.

Unfortunately, Priorian Presentism has often been twisted, both by its defenders and its critics, into a different mold: a position that we might call, following Tooley, *Tensed Facts Presentism*.<sup>23</sup>

The Tensed Facts Presentist insists that a sentence like (C) (or, for that matter, (B)), expresses a brute fact about how things presently are. But if that is what (B) and (C) express, then neither (B) nor (C) manage to tell us what actually happened.

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

10. Obama is sitting.

---

23. (Tooley 1997, p. 238—240). Here, as mentioned in note 4 above, ‘tensed fact’ no longer means ‘temporary fact’.

And now imagine that, 5 seconds having passed, Obama stands up, and we take another snapshot, only to discover that, according to it,

11. It was the case 5 seconds ago that (Obama is not sitting).

This can't be right: if something like this happens, reality has gone haywire. But to express her outrage at this situation, the Tensed Facts Presentist must give herself some means of pointing beyond the present. On her own account, tense operators don't do that. She could introduce some other way of speaking that allowed her to do that, but then, of course, she will have undercut the very motivation for her view.

So we must reject Tensed Facts Presentism. But that does not mean we must reject Priorian Presentism. Instead, we must reconcile ourselves to a certain understanding of what we are doing when we introduce tense operators into our metaphysical lexicon.

The pressure to use the past tense—the pressure to talk not just about what is the case, but about *was* the case—falls out of the assumption that reality is temporary and subject to change. We notice that something is the case, but then that fact slips away, pulling the metaphysical rug out from underneath us. But we cannot then just ignore it, even though it is no longer real, and so we switch from talking about what is the case to talking about what *was* the case. But the moment we do that, we have given ourselves the license—and the means—to point beyond reality.

Perhaps this license is not in our power to give. Perhaps the apparent means we have taken is only an illusion. Perhaps the past tense cannot be used to talk about facts and things that genuinely are no more.

If so, the view that reality is dynamic—that both existence and instantiation are genuinely temporary—is untenable, whether it is conjoined with Eternalism, Pastism, or Presentism.

But it seems to me that the view that existence and instantiation are temporary—that reality changes—is not only tenable, but by far the most natural position to take. And so it seems to me

that we have good reason to endorse Priorian Presentism in its unperverted form, and good reason to accept that, at least in the case of *the past*, we must look beyond the sum total of reality.

## References

Armstrong, DM. 2004. *Truth and truthmakers*. Cambridge University Press.

Bigelow, John. 1996. "Presentism and Properties". *Philosophical Perspectives* 10: 35–52.

Braddon-Mitchell, David. 2004. "How do we know it is now now?". *Analysis* 64(283): 199–203.

Broad, CD. 1923. *Scientific Thought*, Harcourt, Brace and Company.

Fine, Kit. 1977. "Postscript". In Arthur Prior and Kit Fine, *Worlds, Times and Selves*, University of Massachusetts Press.

Fine, Kit. 2001. "The Question of Realism". *Philosophers' Imprint*. 1(2): 1–30.

Fine, Kit. 2005. "Tense and Reality." In his *Modality and Tense*, Oxford University Press.

Heathwood, Chris. 2005. "The real price of the dead past a reply to Forrest and to Braddon-Mitchell". *Analysis* 65(3): 249–251.

Keller, Simon. 2004. "Presentism and Truthmaking". *Oxford Studies in Metaphysics* 1: 83–104.

Leftow, Brian. 2002. "The Eternal Present". In G.E. Ganssle and D. M. Woodruff (eds.), *God and Time Essays on the Divine Nature*, Oxford University Press: 21–48.

Lewis, David. 1986. *On the Plurality of Worlds*. Blackwell.

Markosian, Ned. 1993. "How Fast Does Time Pass?". *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 53(4): 829–844.

McCall, Storrs. 1976. "Objective time flow". *Philosophy of Science* 43(3): 337–362.

McTaggart, J. M. E. 1909. "The Relation of Time and Eternity". *Mind* 18(71): 343–362.

\_\_\_\_\_. 1927. *The Nature of Existence*, Volume 2, Cambridge University Press.

Merricks, Trenton. 2006. "Goodbye Growing Block". *Oxford Studies in Metaphysics* 2: 103–110.

Prior, AN. 1970. "The Notion of the Present". *Studium Generale* 23: 245–248.

Sider, Theodore. 2001. *Four-Dimensionalism: An Ontology of Persistence and Time*, Oxford University Press.

Tooley, Michael. 1997. *Time, Tense & Causation*. Oxford University Press.

Williamson, Timothy. 1998. "Bare Possibilia". *Erkenntnis* 48:257–273.

Zimmerman, Dean. 2005. "The A-Theory of Time, the B-Theory of Time, and 'Taking Tense Seriously'". *Dialectica* 59(4): 401–457.