

Once Present, Now Past^{*}

David Sanson

October 15, 2011

If reality is temporary, then reality changes, and if reality changes, the past has explanatory work to do, and it cannot do that work unless it is no longer real. This tells against the Moving Now Theory, the Growing Block Theory, and any form of Presentism that attempts to understand the past in terms of the present, including Tensed Properties Presentism and Tensed Facts Presentism. It tells in favor of a form Presentism that allows us to appeal to unreal past facts. I suggest that Priorian Presentism, conjoined with a certain way of understanding the role played by tense operators, is one such view.

1 Dynamic Reality

Many philosophers think that reality is static.¹ 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.² The universe is a four-dimensional spacetime block, and there is no fundamental distinction between past, present, and future. 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 facts.³

^{*}[acknowledgments withheld.]

¹Throughout this paper, I will make free use of the concept of *reality*. With Fine (2005, p. 261), I am convinced that, when it comes to the issues at hand, “essential appeal must be made to the concept of reality”, and so I do so without apology. I will also freely talk of the *facts* as though they were entities, and *reality* as though it was an entity constituted by the *real facts*. I am less inclined to take this apparent entification of facts and reality seriously, but I make no attempt here to show that it is dispensable.

²I will not make any distinction between *permanent*, *timeless*, and *eternal* in this paper, though no doubt there are distinctions here that could be made.

³The 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 *detensers* or *B-theorists*. For a brilliant polemic in favor of this view, see Williams (1951). For two thoughtful defenses, see Sider (2001) and Mellor (1998).

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 or go out of existence, gain or lose properties, join or break off relations. Fundamental metaphysics, on this view, is ensnared in a messy flux of temporary objects or facts.⁴

This paper aims to make sense of that messy flux, or, at least, suggest the direction in which that sense must be made. The core thesis defended is twofold. First, if reality is dynamic, the past is explanatorily ineliminable: it does work that nothing else can do. Second, if reality is dynamic, the past is not real. These two claims are connected: if reality is dynamic, the past must be unreal in order to do the explanatory work that only it can do.⁵

I think reflection on this point suggests that the most plausible view to have, if one thinks that reality is dynamic, is a form of Presentism that combines the claim that the only real facts are present facts with the claim that the past is, as Prior once put it, a “species of unreality” (1970, p. 245).

The remainder of this section aims to say something helpful about what it means to say that reality is dynamic, by describing ways in which it is and isn’t analogous to certain views about the contingency of reality, and by explaining how it connects with views about the reality of change.

Section 2 develops the argument that the past is both explanatorily ineliminable and unreal. Section 2.1 considers the *Moving Now Theory*, arguing that the theory is committed to two distinct ways of conceiving of the past, and that on the more fundamental of the two, the past is unreal. Section 2.2 extends this point to other dynamic views, including many forms of Presentism.

Section 3 attempts to say something helpful about where this leaves us. There I suggest that the issue is not fundamentally about what form of language we should use in talking about the past, but about what sort of metaphysical interpretation we put upon that language. I then discuss two metaphysical interpretations of Priorian past-tense operators, and consider what one might say to justify a metaphysical interpretation of the operator that treats it as a device for making claims about an unreal past.

⁴The 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*. For a nice recent discussion of what the view comes to, and how to distinguish it from related views about language and thought, see Zimmerman (2005).

⁵And so, if I am right, philosophers who think that reality is dynamic are forced to pull apart reality and fundamentality in a way that runs contrary to much recent work, which tends to assume that only the real can be fundamental. See, for example, Fine (2001) and Schaffer (2009).

1.1 The Modal Analogy

In order to get clearer on what is meant by the claim that reality is dynamic, it is helpful to consider ways in which the view is analogous to familiar views about modality.

Most of us think that reality is contingent. There are contingent objects—things that exist but might not have—and there are contingent facts—things that are the case but might not have been. Barack Obama, for example, is a contingent object, and it is a contingent fact that he is the 44th President of the United States. The flip side of the contingent is the merely possible: facts that could have obtained by do not, like the fact that John McCain is President; things that could have existed but do not, like the table I could have made from this hunk of wood.

Just as most of us think that reality is contingent, many of us think that reality is temporary. There are temporary objects—things that exist but have not always existed or will not always exist; and there are temporary facts—things that are the case but have not always been or will not always be the case.⁶

The flip side of the temporary is twofold: the merely past and the merely future. Here, for simplicity, I will focus on the past and ignore the future. Past facts are facts that once obtained but no longer do—like the fact that George W. Bush is President; past objects are objects that once existed but no longer do—like Hunter S. Thompson.

In order to talk about contingency and its flip side, possibility, we are driven to introduce modal idioms. And so we say that Obama exists, but *might* not have; that he is President, but *might* not have been; that McCain is not President, but *could* have been. In the same way, in order to talk about temporariness and pastness, we are driven to introduce tensed idioms. And so we say that Obama is President but he *won't* be; that Bush is not President but he *was*; that Thompson doesn't exist but he *once did*.

This suggests a certain order of analysis. Someone who believes that reality is temporary should understand her philosophical use of tensed idioms in that light: they are devices introduced to express this. And the “friend of boxes and diamonds”—the philosopher who insists that modal idioms are primitive—was

⁶As 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 we are blending language and metaphysics in illegitimate ways when talking about tensed facts.

probably first a friend of contingency, and she should understand her philosophical use of modal idioms in that light.⁷

1.2 Real Change

There are many analogies between modality and time, and, more specifically, between the view that reality is contingent and the view that reality is temporary. But one key metaphysical difference between the contingent and the temporary has to do with change. To suppose that reality is temporary is to suppose that reality *changes*. We can talk, if we wish, about things varying from possible world to possible world. But this is just a way of talking, an extension of a way of talking that is proper to the metaphysics of the temporary, but not the contingent. It is therefore helpful to consider what is meant by the claim that reality changes.

Everyone—even those who think that reality is static—will allow that there is some sense in which things change. Consider something that is temporarily the case—say, that you are reading this sentence. That is something that was the case, but no longer is the case. Those who think that reality is static will treat this sort of example by pointing to some underlying structure of permanent facts. Those who think that reality is temporary, by contrast, will take this, or things similar, at face value: some real facts really change; the facts that constitute reality now are different from the facts that constituted reality a moment ago.

Call the sort of change posited by those who think reality is temporary *real change*. This label is not meant to be prejudicial or polemical. It is not meant to indicate that this is the right way to think about change, or that those who think about change differently do not really believe in change. It is meant to evoke the idea that reality itself changes. If reality is static, the kind of change that there really is won't be real change in this sense, but it will be none the worse for it.⁸

1.3 Restricting Real Change

Even if we agree that reality is temporary, and that there is real change, there is plenty of room to disagree about exactly what is and what is not temporary, exactly what does or does not really change. One way to categorize extant

⁷So I think Fine's *modalism*—the view that the modal idioms are primitive—fails to get at the core of the important view in this area (1977, p. 116). “Friends of boxes and diamonds” is Lewis's term for people who make primitive use of modal idioms (1986, p. 12).

⁸Likewise, there is a sense in which a dualist might say that a physicalist does not believe in the reality of mental facts, not because the physicalist does not believe that there *are* mental facts, but because she believes that, ultimately, those mental facts are to be analyzed in terms of some underlying physical facts.

dynamic views is by considering what sorts of real change they do and do not allow.

For example, *Growing Block Theorists* think that, when it comes to real change, there is an important past-future asymmetry: as time passes, new things and new facts come to be, but old things and old facts never cease to be.⁹ The universe, they say, has the structure of a four-dimensional spacetime, 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 things and facts that have just come into existence lie on the top of the block, so to speak, at the edge of reality. As time passes, new things and new facts come to be, and the old things and facts that once were present—were once on the edge—recede into the block, becoming past, but continuing to exist.

Another view that places restrictions on real change is the *Moving Now Theory*. On this view, all things are permanent and most facts are permanent as well. The only real changes concern which events are past, present, or future.¹⁰ As time passes, each event has these properties in turn: first, it has *being future*, then *being present*, then *being past*. These changes correspond to a single dynamic aspect of reality: the movement of the “now” across an otherwise static four-dimensional structure of permanent things and facts.

Other sorts of restrictions are possible. McCall (1994) argues that the universe has the structure of a four-dimensional tree, with a single trunk constituting the past, and separate real branches for each possible future. As time passes, reality is forced to choose from amongst the branches. The chosen branch continues to exist, and the others are pruned away from reality, ceasing to exist. This view in effect inverts the past-future asymmetry that characterizes the Growing Block Theory: here, new things and facts never come to be, but old things and old facts—the ones that correspond to the possible futures that are pruned away—are constantly ceasing to be.

These three views each posit a real past. I will argue that a real past, like the pasts they posit, cannot do the work that the past needs to do, given that reality is dynamic. But it is also worth drawing attention to a simple-minded consideration that already points against them. It is hard to see why, if things

⁹See, for example, Broad (1923, p. 69), Tooley (1997).

¹⁰The 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)

can really come to be, they should not also really cease to be, and vice versa: the natural position is to allow both if you allow either. And it is hard to see why, if things can really gain or lose properties, they should not also really come to be or cease to be: again, the natural view is to allow both if you allow either.¹¹ There is no doubt that admitting some kind of real change makes things messier, metaphysically. But the kind of mess that is introduced is foundational, and one suspects the costs incurred by owning up to it are not going to be especially sensitive to how widespread the mess might be. Once you've taken the plunge, and decided to allow *some* real change, it seems more elegant, more uniform, more natural, to allow real change without restriction.

The acceptance of unrestricted real change—the view that things come to be and cease to be, gain and lose properties—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 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. Some theists describe God's existence in just these terms: he lives in an eternal, unchanging present.¹²

Taken by itself, Presentism is also consistent with the sorts of restrictions on real 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 the facts about these souls change, as the souls gain and lose properties. 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, their properties. But most Presentists intend, I think, to endorse unrestricted real change.¹³

If one ignores this connection between Presentism and 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

¹¹Williamson (1998, pp. 265–268) argues that things are permanent, but facts are temporary. So, for example, Nixon exists, but the only facts about Nixon are the present facts about Nixon, like the fact that he is the only President ever to have resigned his office. Other facts, like the fact that he is President, or the fact that he is human, or the fact that he is spatially located, are facts that once existed but no longer do, reflecting properties that Nixon once had but has since lost. For the purposes of this paper, this view can be considered a close cousin to Presentism. In particular, a proponent of this view will face the same sorts of issues as Presentists when it comes to how to account for the past.

¹²This is one way of understanding Boethius' claim that it is a property of the mind of God "to have embraced the whole of everlasting life in one simultaneous present" (1969, Book V, Prose VI). For a recent development and defense of the view, see Leftow (2002).

¹³Similar 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, perhaps because it is, as Armstrong says, an "unlovely" term (2004, p. 145).)

Presentism reads this way: the project Presentists set themselves is to find a way to do without the past and future—a way to make do only with the present—in much the way that the project Nominalists set themselves is to find a way to do without universals—a way to make do only with particulars.¹⁴

But this emphasis is a mistake. The project facing Presentists is to make sense of the messy metaphysics of real change. If the defender of austerity seeks to show us how we can get what we want while leaving a cleaner simpler metaphysical footprint, the defender of unrestricted real change seeks to show us how to walk, one foot after another. The project is not to make do without the past steps, but to make sense of their status as past, and so no longer real.

2 Past Facts

So much for preliminaries. It remains to show that, if reality is dynamic, past facts are both explanatorily ineliminable—they do work that nothing else can do—and unreal—they were but no longer are real. In this section, I first consider the Moving Now Theory, arguing that the theory is committed to two different accounts of the past, and that, upon reflection, the fundamental account is in terms of an unreal past. I then argue that this point extends to all dynamic theories.

Before doing that, I want to introduce “snapshots”, which I think of as heuristic devices for thinking about reality. A snapshot is, intuitively, a representation of “the sum total of reality”—everything there is and all the facts, including all facts about all the properties things have and relations things bear.¹⁵ 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 be different.

It can be useful to model the changes in a dynamic world as a series of snapshots, each representing the whole of reality as it was at a given moment of time. But we have to be careful to remember that this is only a model. In one crucial respect, it is deeply misleading, for the snapshots themselves all coexist in a series in a way that the differences that they represent never do. Thus it is easy to shift from modeling reality via a series of snapshots to positing some sort of metaphysically real hypertime. A more faithful representation of a dynamic world would use a dynamic model—a model that itself really changes in ways that reflect the real changes in the world. The use of concrete dynamic models is familiar enough from engineering, and I see no reason why we could not, if we wished, represent reality via an abstract dynamic model as well. But faithfulness is not always the highest virtue when it comes to representing things with models, and this is not something I will pursue here.

¹⁴For an example of some remarks that read this way—though by someone who presumably accepts unrestricted real change—see Markosian (2004, pp. 61–62).

¹⁵My “snapshots” are essentially the same as Storrs McCall’s “universe-pictures” (1994, p. 340).

Recall that, for the Moving Now Theorist, reality consists of a fixed series of events, ordered from earlier to later. The fundamental dynamic feature of reality is the movement of the “now”, understood to consist in real changes concerning which events in the series are present.

Supposing this were so, a snapshot of the sum total of reality, as it is right now, might look something like this:

$$1. \dots E_{-2} \rightarrow E_{-1} \rightarrow \mathbf{E}_0 \rightarrow E_1 \rightarrow E_2 \dots$$

Here (1) represents a series of events, E_{-2} , E_{-1} , E_0 , and so on, ordered by the *earlier to later* relation (here represented by the ‘ \rightarrow ’), and E_0 has the property *being present* (here represented by the use of boldface). Obviously this is oversimplified: it suggests that the series is discrete, that events are momentary, and that no two events can occur at the same time. But nothing hinges on these oversimplifications.

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

$$2. \dots E_{-2} \rightarrow E_{-1} \rightarrow E_0 \rightarrow \mathbf{E}_1 \rightarrow E_2 \dots$$

The underlying series of events remains the same, but now E_1 has the property *being present* instead of E_0 .

(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_0 has *being present* and E_1 does not. According to (2), E_1 has *being present* and E_0 does not. So they cannot both be right—at least not together.¹⁶ 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 other one gets things right: each is accurate in succession. Assuming that the Moving Now Theory is correct, this is precisely what happened when we took our snapshots, and the difference between (1) and (2) provides an accurate record of this.

Supposing (2) is now the accurate representation of how things are, E_0 is past. But there are two ways that we might think about what it is for E_0 to be past in this context.

On the one hand, if we just look at (2), we can see that E_0 stands in a relation to E_1 , and E_1 has the property *being present*. The relation, according to the theory, is the *earlier than* relation. So E_0 is earlier than something present, and so past. These facts—the fact that E_0 is earlier than that E_1 and the fact

¹⁶For development of a view that allows that the facts represented by both snapshots can, in some sense, obtain together, see Fine (2005).

that E_1 is present—are among the facts that currently constitute reality, and so among the facts displayed in (2).

On the other hand, it seems equally natural to look at the contrast between (1) and (2), and note that E_0 once had the property *being present*, but no longer does. This way of thinking about what it is for E_0 to be past appears, at first blush, to look beyond the facts displayed in (2), by reminding us that the facts were once different, a bit of history that we captured by taking snapshot (1).

I find it helpful to think of this distinction in terms of one account that points to how things are now, and attempts to account for the pastness of E_0 in terms of the properties and relations things now instantiate, and another account that points to how things once were, and the properties and relations things once instantiated. Call the first sort of account an account in terms of the *now-past*, and the second an account in terms of the *once-present*.

More specifically, then, in the case of the Moving Now Theory, the two accounts are

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

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

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 is only a parasitic symptom or semblance of the past.

One way to bring this out is to consider metaphysical views that *look* a lot like the Moving Now Theory, but allow for unexpected deviance.

2.1 The Skipping Now

Suppose for example that the world is as described by the Moving Now Theory, except that the property *being present*, as it sweeps down the series of events, occasionally skips over an event, so that that event is in the series, but never gets to be present. Call this the *Skipping Now Theory*.

For example, imagine that, as before, we take a snapshot that looks something like this,

$$3. \dots E_{-2} \rightarrow E_{-1} \rightarrow E_0 \rightarrow \mathbf{E}_1 \rightarrow E_2 \dots$$

This snapshot appears identical to (2),

2. ... $E_{-2} \rightarrow E_{-1} \rightarrow E_0 \rightarrow \mathbf{E}_1 \rightarrow E_2$...

Just looking at the snapshots—just looking at how things are—it is hard to see how there could be any way to tell whether or not we are in a world with a well-behaved now or a now that skips. Intuitively, the disagreement between the Skipping Now Theorist and the Moving Now Theorist concerns how things were, not how they are, and this is not a disagreement that comes out when we just compare the current snapshots.

Suppose that, in fact, the Skipping Now Theory is correct, and that E_0 was skipped over, and never had the property *being present*. Then it seems that we have a case in which E_0 is now-past, for it is earlier than an event that is present, but was not once-present, for it never had the property *being present*.

This seems like an odd result; then again, the Skipping Now Theory is an odd theory. But what can the Moving Now Theorist say to distinguish herself from the Skipping Now Theorist? She could say that, by her lights, the once-present and the now-past cannot come apart.

Pushing a bit deeper, perhaps the key to seeing why the property *being present* cannot move the way the Skipping Now Theory proposes, but must instead move in the well-behaved manner proposed by the Moving Now Theorist, lies in the fact that the ordering relation displayed in (3) cannot really be the *earlier to later* relation, since E_0 was never present, and so cannot be earlier than E_1 . One might say that it is the very nature of the *earlier to later* relation to be *induced* by the movement of the property *being present* from event to event.¹⁷ An event that never gets the property has been left out of the series, just as a child whose head is not even tapped in a game of duck-duck-goose has been left out of the game. This, I think, is an extremely plausible thing for a Moving Now Theorist to say.¹⁸

But what it means is that, for the Moving Now Theorist, the account of the past that we get by looking at the now-past—at the properties and relations things now instantiate—is parasitic on a prior account of the past in terms of the once-present. For we cannot see, just by looking at the structure displayed in the current snapshot, whether or not E_0 is really past: we need to know whether or not the relations in that structure are genuine *earlier to later* relations, and we only know that by considering how things have changed, from snapshot to snapshot, and, in particular, whether or not E_0 ever had the property *being present*.

¹⁷See Broad (1923, p. 81–82).

¹⁸This is similar in spirit to McTaggart's criticism of Russell (1927, p. 14). For Russell, events are ordered from earlier to later but reality is static. McTaggart complains that no series can be a temporal series if there is no real change, and so suggests that the ordering relation, for Russell, cannot be a temporal relation, like *earlier to later*. Here, the Moving Now Theorist need not make such sweeping claims. All she needs is the claim that the relation she calls 'earlier to later', in the context of her own views about reality, is essentially tied to the movement of the now.

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

For example, just as we might imagine that the now occasionally skips an event, we might imagine that occasionally, an event in the series ceases to exist. So we might move from a snapshot that looks like this,

$$4. \dots E_{-2} \rightarrow E_{-1} \rightarrow \mathbf{E}_0 \rightarrow E_1 \rightarrow E_2 \dots$$

to one that looks like this,

$$5. \dots E_{-2} \rightarrow E_{-1} \rightarrow \mathbf{E}_1 \rightarrow E_2 \dots$$

Here E_0 had the property *being present*, but then ceased to exist, and so no longer appears in the series of events at all.

One more example of this sort of deviance: the (slightly heterodox) Young Earth Creationist who admits the existence of the Big Bang, and admits that it happened earlier than 6000 years ago, but claims that it never had the property *being present*, because the journey of the Moving Now only began 6000 years ago.

Note that, when considering these deviant views, we cannot trust presently existing snapshots that were taken in the past. They too might have changed, or been replaced or removed, and so fail to accurately represent how things once were.

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

2.2 The Frozen Now

There is another way things could go wrong, such that the current snapshot might be misleading. Suppose one particular event— E_0 , say—has a property that no other events have. And suppose it has this property permanently, not temporarily. Call this property *being frozen*. Let's represent this property in snapshots by using italics instead of boldface,

6. ... $E_{-2} \rightarrow E_{-1} \rightarrow E_0 \rightarrow E_1 \rightarrow E_2$...

This looks much the same as a snapshot, like (1), that represents E_0 as having the property *being present*. If there is any difference between the reality represented by (1) and the reality represented here by (6), it lies in some difference between the two properties, *being present* and *being frozen*. What is that difference?

It is natural to suppose that *being present* cannot be instantiated permanently. But it is not obvious that this is so.¹⁹ McTaggart (1909) argues that the last moment of time, once it became present, would remain present permanently, because, being last, it would never become past. By similar reasoning—not endorsed by McTaggart—one could argue that the first moment of time, if there were one, was present but could never become present, because it was never future. Putting these two points together, we reach the conclusion that, if there were only a single moment of time, and if it were present, it would be permanently present. As already mentioned, some theists think that this is a good way to understand divine eternity.

Put those issues aside. Let us grant that *being present*, by its very nature, is a property that cannot be permanently instantiated. That gets us a real difference between (1) and (6). But, like the suggestion considered above, about the nature of the *earlier to later* relation, this makes the now-past parasitic upon the once-present. For the ultimate account of what makes *being present* different from *being frozen*, and so what makes (1) different from (6), must appeal to how E_0 once was, as represented by past snapshots, or how it will be, as represented by future snapshots.

The Moving Now Theorist, then, appears to have two ways of thinking about the pastness of past facts. The first is in terms of the now-past, i.e., in terms of what there is and how things are; the second is in terms of the once-present, i.e., in terms of what there was and how things were. I have argued that she cannot understand the past only in terms of the now-past. This is either because the now-past fails to settle what really happened—by, for example, failing to settle between the Moving Now Theory and the Skipping Now Theory—or it is because the now-past itself must be understood in terms of the once-present—as when one insists on certain claims about the nature of *being present* or the *earlier to later* relation. If anything, this suggests that the Moving Now Theorist might consider doing without the now-past, and think about the past directly in the more fundamental way, in terms of the once present.

¹⁹The specter of a frozen present is raised, but not addressed, in Markosian (1993, p. 835). Sider (2001, p. 22) raises an analogous worry for the Growing Block Theorist.

2.3 Presentism

All of this applies with equal force to the Growing Block Theory.²⁰ More generally, it applies to any dynamic theory—any theory that allows that there is real change.

A lot has been written about how Presentists might go about trying to ground the truth of propositions about the past in facts about the present.²¹ But when we think about real change, and the need to account for it, it is hard to see how this could be done: any facts about the present that ground truths about the past are going to be, as they were for the Moving Now Theorist, parasitic on an understanding of the past that is not in terms of the present.

Suppose, for the sake of concreteness, that we take a snapshot in 2006, and then take a second snapshot now, in 2011. Put aside everything other than George W. Bush, and focus on the facts about who is and who isn't President of the United States.

7. Bush: *being President*

8. Bush: *not being President*

According to (7)—the snapshot taken in 2006—Bush has the property *being President*. According to (8)—taken now, in 2011—Bush does not have the property *being President*, but has the property *not being President* instead.²²

When we considered the Moving Now Theory, there were obvious materials in the current snapshot in terms of which to construct an account of the now-past. At first blush, these Presentist snapshots don't offer up any such materials. Just looking at what is represented in (8), for example, there is nothing to suggest that Bush once was President.

But Presentists have taught us how to inflate the present, and thereby construct an account of the now-past. The hope seems to be that, by doing this, we can forgo the apparent costs of our metaphysical austerity. There are several ways this has been done.²³ Here I consider only one, but I think that what I have to say about it extends fairly easy to the other accounts as well.

The *Tensed Properties Presentist* asks us to add additional “past-tensed properties” to our snapshots.²⁴ These are properties like *having been President*. So

²⁰For 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).

²¹See Bigelow (1996), Keller (2004), Crisp (2007), Merricks (2007), Sanson and Caplan (2010), Cameron (2010).

²²Perhaps it would be better to say that Bush does not have the property *being President*. I am not going to worry about the status of “negative” properties like *not being President*.

²³Keller (2004) surveys several of the options.

²⁴Few 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” (1996, p. 46).

instead of (8), we have

9. Bush: *not being President, having been 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 now-past, here understood in terms of the past-tensed properties things now have. On the other hand, we can think about the past in terms of the once-present, where here that involves noticing that things once were the way (7) represents them to be, not the way (9) represents them to be.

And all the reasons for thinking that a Moving Now Theorist must make use of the once-present in her account of the now-past apply here as well. Consider, for example, someone who maintains that a snapshot circa 1996 would have shown something like this,

10. Bush: *not being President*; Gore: *being President*

but agrees that the current snapshot looks like this,

11. Bush: *having been President*; Gore: *not having been President*

To be sure, this is an odd view. The suggestion seems to be that Bush gained the property *having been President* after the fact, in some nefarious way, even though, he never had the property *being President*. The oddity here is just like the oddity in supposing that one event is earlier than a present event, even though it never had the property *being present*.

A reasonable thing for the Tensed Properties Presentist to say at this point is that this cannot be, because the property *having been President*, by its very nature, is such that nothing can have it unless it once had the property *being President*. This a reasonable thing to say. But it suggests that the account here given of the past in terms of the now-past—the now having of a past-tensed property—is ultimately parasitic upon a prior account of the past in terms of the once-present.²⁵

3 The Unreal Past

At one point, Prior says,

²⁵This is perhaps one way of understanding Sider's complaint that this sort of appeal is an "ontological cheat", because tensed properties "point beyond" their instances (2001, p. 41). Note that this is only a "cheat" if we assume that the rules of the game require that we provide an account of the past entirely in terms of present reality.

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).

The quote suggests that we cannot understand the presentness of present reality except by contrasting it to the pastness of past reality. And the pastness of past reality, I have been trying to argue, is no part of reality at all. Any attempt to “build the past in” to reality—any attempt to account for the past in terms of the now-past, as I have been putting it—either fails, because the resulting account doesn’t settle what actually happened, and so opens up the possibility of strange forms of deviance, or, succeeds, but only by using materials that themselves are understood in terms of the once-present, that is, terms that take us beyond (present) reality.

Where does this leave us? For one thing, I think it leaves us with a fairly powerful argument against non-presentist dynamic views. It is natural to take such views as motivated by an attempt to supply a real past, and thereby provide an account of the past that does not “go beyond” reality. But if I am right, any such attempt, in the context of a dynamic theory, is doomed to fail. The real past provided will not be adequate to the job; it will be parasitic and, perhaps, entirely redundant. And so the metaphysical cost of going beyond reality is a cost every dynamic theory must pay.

One alternative, then, is to forgo any real past—any past understood in terms of the now-past—and embrace the once-present as one’s sole account of the past. If we combine this with unrestricted real change, allowing things to gain and lose properties, come into and out of existence, we get a fairly pure form of Presentism, one that does not attempt to inflate the present with materials that properly belong to the past.

But what does that form of Presentism look like?

Throughout the paper, I have been using verbal tense to mark the difference between the now-past and the once-present. For example, when discussing (10) and (11), I in effect drew a distinction between the claim that,

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

and

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

I think this is a natural way to mark the difference. It is natural to take (13) as a claim not about current reality, as represented by a current snapshot, but as a claim about past reality, as represented by a past snapshot. And it is natural to take (12) as a claim not about past reality, but present reality, an attribution to Bush of a property he now has.

But I don't think anything about the form of language used *forces* either interpretation. Technical issues aside, there is no obvious reason why one could not analyze the verbal tense in (13) in terms of some sort of predicate modifier, like the *having been* found in (12), or vice versa. The distinction I am drawing between the once-present and the now-past is a metaphysical distinction, and it is not obvious that it should map on to any particular proposal about how we ought to talk about the past.

That said, it might be helpful to consider how this difference plays out in two different metaphysical interpretations of a Priorian past-tense operator. According to Prior, the primitive idiom for expressing claims about the past is a sentential operator, **P**, equivalent to 'it was the case that'. So, for example, if 'Bush is President' is represented as 'b', then 'Bush was President' is represented as

14. **Pb**

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

embodies the truth behind Augustine's suggestion of the 'secret place' where past and future times 'are', and his insistence that, where they are, they are not there as past or future but as present. The past is not the present, but it *is* the past present, and the future is not the present, but it *is* the future present (Prior 1968, p. 13).

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

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

This is all, I think, quite suggestive. On one interpretation, Prior's past-tense operator is precisely intended to be a device for expressing the metaphysics of the once-present, a device for making claims not about how things are, but how they once were.

But the dominant interpretation seems to take a different direction. Tooley (1997, p. 238) takes Prior to have endorsed the view that "statements about the past could be analyzed in terms of statements about the present," so that "the statement that there were dinosaurs could be true now, for then its truth-maker could consist, not of some past state of affairs, but rather, of present-tense

states of affairs.” And he goes on to discuss a view, which he calls *Tensed-Facts Presentism*, according to which the present is in part constituted by brute “past-tensed states of affairs”.²⁶

The thought here seems to be that we might inflate the present not with past-tensed properties—i.e., properties denoted by past-tensed predicates, like ‘having been President’—but with past-tensed facts—i.e., facts denoted by past-tensed sentences, like ‘Bush was President’. But this is just another way of trying to build the past into the present—another stab at constructing an account of the past in terms of the now-past. And it faces all the problems that such accounts face.

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

15. Obama is sitting.

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

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

This can’t be right: something has gone haywire. But to express her outrage at this situation, the Tensed-Facts Presentist must give herself some means of pointing “beyond” the facts represented in (16). On her own account, tense operators don’t do that. She could introduce some other idiom that allowed her to do that—an extra set of tense operators?—but then she will have undercut the very motivation for her view.

Return, then, to the alternative metaphysical interpretation of the past-tense operator. What exactly does that interpretation come to? Here I find it very difficult to say anything more than I have already said, but I will try.

Above, when discussing the analogy between temporariness and pastness, on the one hand, and contingency and possibility, on the other, I suggested that, for someone who believes that reality is contingent, there is pressure to introduce modal idioms adequate to express that contingency, and that those idioms, for that philosopher, should be understood in that light. And I suggested that, analogously, for someone who believes that reality is temporary, there is pressure to introduce tensed idioms, and those idioms, for that philosopher, should be understood in that light.

Suppose that, under this pressure, we decide to be Priorians, and adopt a past-tense operator as one of our basic tensed idioms. We are then pressed to say

²⁶For a similar interpretation of Prior, according to which he must invoke “primitive present facts” to explain the truth of sentences like (14), see Bourne (2007, p. 41–46).

something about the proper metaphysical interpretation of our use of that operator. What we should say is that the proper metaphysical interpretation of our operator is the interpretation that flows from the metaphysical commitments that drove us to use it.

The pressure to use the past tense in the way the Priorian does—the pressure to talk not just about what is the case, but about what was the case—falls out of the assumption that reality is temporary and subject to change. We notice some fact, but then that fact slips away, pulling the metaphysical rug out from underneath us. So we switch from talking in the present-tense mode about the facts—about what is the case—to talking in the past-tense mode about the past facts—about what was the case. But to make this switch just is to give ourselves the license—and seize for ourselves the means—to express the pastness of past facts in a way that respects their unreality.

As we've seen, this pastness cannot lie in some further fact about the present—or, indeed, in any further facts at all. In giving ourselves the license and means to express this pastness, we have given ourselves the license and means to express a proposition whose truth cannot be grounded in some fact or facts about the present—or, indeed, in any facts at all.

Perhaps this license is not in our power to give; perhaps the means we seize are illusory. Perhaps, if reality is dynamic, there is just no way to express the contrast we need to express, between the unreal past and the real present. If so, the view that reality is dynamic is ineffable, and perhaps therefore untenable.

But if the view is tenable and effable—as I am inclined to think it is—then I'd suggest that the most plausible dynamic view is a form of Presentism that conjoins a certain kind of metaphysical austerity—it makes no attempt to inflate the present with materials proper to the past—with a certain kind of metaphysical messiness—it embraces the thought that the past, properly understood, is both explanatorily fundamental and unreal.

References

- Armstrong, David M. 2004. *Truth and Truthmakers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bigelow, John. 1996. "Presentism and Properties." *Philosophical Perspectives* 10: 35-52.
- Boethius. 1969. *The Consolation of Philosophy*. Trans. V. E. Watts. Baltimore: Penguin Books.
- Bourne, Craig. 2007. *A Future for Presentism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Braddon-Mitchell, David. 2004. "How Do We Know It Is Now Now?" *Analysis* 64: 199-203.

- Broad, Charlie Dunbar. 1923. *Scientific Thought*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Cameron, Ross. 2010. "Truthmaking for Presentists." *Oxford Studies in Metaphysics* 6: 55-100.
- Crisp, Thomas. 2007. "Presentism and Grounding." *Noûs* 41: 90-109.
- Fine, Kit. 1977. Postscript. In *Worlds, Times and Selves*, 116-168. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press.
- . 2001. "The Question of Realism." *Philosophers' Imprint* 1: 1-30.
- . 2005. Tense and Reality. In *Modality and Tense*, 261-320. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Heathwood, Chris. 2005. "The Real Price of the Dead Past: A Reply to Forrest and to Braddon-Mitchell." *Analysis* 65: 249-251.
- Keller, Simon. 2004. "Presentism and Truthmaking." *Oxford Studies in Metaphysics* 1: 83-104.
- Leftow, Brian. 2002. The Eternal Present. In *God and Time: Essays on the Divine Nature*, ed. Gregory E. Ganssle and David M. Woodruff, 21-48. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lewis, David. 1986. *On the Plurality of Worlds*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Markosian, Ned. 1993. "How Fast Does Time Pass?" *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 53: 829-844.
- . 2004. "A Defense of Presentism." *Oxford Studies in Metaphysics* 1: 47-82.
- McCall, Storrs. 1994. *A Model of the Universe*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- McTaggart, John McTaggart Ellis. 1909. "The Relation of Time and Eternity." *Mind* 18: 343-362.
- . 1927. *The Nature of Existence*. Ed. Charlie Dunbar Broad. Vols. 2. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Mellor, D. H. 1998. *Real Time II*. London: Routledge.
- Merricks, Trenton. 2006. "Goodbye Growing Block." *Oxford Studies in Metaphysics* 2: 103-110.
- . 2007. *Truth and Ontology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Prior, Arthur. 1968. Changes in Events and Changes in Things. In *Papers on Time and Tense*, 7-19. London: Oxford University Press.
- . 1970. "The Notion of the Present." *Studium Generale* 23: 245-248.

- Sanson, David, and Ben Caplan. 2010. "The Way Things Were." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 81: 24-39.
- Schaffer, Jonathan. 2009. On What Grounds What. In *Metametaphysics*, ed. David Chalmers, David Manley, and Ryan Wasserman, 357-383. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Sider, Theodore. 2001. *Four-Dimensionalism: An Ontology of Persistence and Time*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Tooley, Michael. 1997. *Time, Tense, and Causation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Williams, Donald C. 1951. "The Myth of Passage." *The Journal of Philosophy* 48: 457-472.
- 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: 401-457.