There's no time like the Present

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Abstract. No-futurists ('growing block theorists') hold that that the past and the present are real, but that the future is not. The present moment is therefore privileged: it is the last moment of time. Craig Bourne (2002) and David Braddon-Mitchell (2004) have argued that this position is unmotivated, since the privilege of presentness comes apart from the indexicality of 'this moment'. I respond that no-futurists should treat 'x is real-as-of y' as a nonsymmetric relation. Then different moments are real-as-of different times. This reunites privilege with indexicality, but entails that no-futurists must believe in ineliminably tensed facts.

No-futurists believe that the past and the present are real, but that the future is not (see e.g. Tooley 1997). No-futurists therefore believe that the present moment is privileged in being the last moment of time. Branching-futurists believe something similar: they hold that the past and the present are linear and actual, but that the future consists of branching possibilities (see e.g. McCall 1984). Branching-futurists therefore believe that the present moment is privileged in being the last actual moment of time. In this paper I only discuss no-futurism, but everything I say can be said about branching-futurism with only minimal alteration.

There are two possible readings of 'the present'. On the first, 'the present' is a mere indexical which refers to the moment simultaneous with the token of 'the present'.[1] On the second, 'the present' is a technical term which denotes time's privileged (i.e. last) moment, whenever that might be.[2] To avoid confusion, I write 'this moment' for the indexical sense of 'the present', and I write 'the PRESENT moment' for the privileged sense. That is, 'PRESENT' is a predicate applied to moments or events to indicate that they are privileged. (Similarly for 'PAST' and 'FUTURE'.)

In this terminology, no-futurists claim that this moment is PRESENT. Iaim to defend this claim against a challenge raised by Bourne (2002) and Braddon-Mitchell (2004). In doing so I shall argue, contrary to most no-futurists, that tense is indispensable to no-futurism.

1   The present problem

Bourne (2002: 360) and Braddon-Mitchell (2004: 200) pose the question:

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[1] What Bourne calls 'the present' and Forrest calls 'now_i'.

[2] What Bourne calls '*present*' and Forrest calls 'now_b'.

(A) Is this moment PRESENT?

For detensers, nothing is PRESENT, so (A) does not even arise. (A) is also unproblematic for presentists: presentism states that only PRESENT things are real, so this moment must be PRESENT. (A) is a serious question only for theories which, like no-futurism, hold that there are both PRESENT and non-PRESENT moments.

No-futurists naturally want to answer (A) affirmatively, but Bourne and Braddon-Mitchell raise a sceptical argument against their doing so. Suppose I have been a no-futurist since April 1997. Today, I am

> ... convinced that my time is [PRESENT]. But wasn't I just as convinced yesterday...? So, there am I as I was yesterday, as real as I am now, believing that I am [PRESENT], and thinking pretty much the same things then about my previous selves as I think today. Yet I know now that my earlier self is mistaken; so how do I know that I now am not? (Bourne: 362)[3]

Contemporary no-futurists have all the same evidence for thinking that their time is PRESENT as their predecessors did. By induction on the errors of their predecessors, no-futurists are almost certainly mistaken in their central claim that this moment is PRESENT. With Bourne, call this sceptical induction 'the Present Problem'.

2   Disambiguation and the real-as-of relation

The problem which arises by disambiguating 'present' is dissolved by disambiguating 'is' between tensed and tenseless interpretations. I use boldface for tenseless verbs (e.g. it **rains** at t) and italics for tensed verbs (e.g. it *rains*). Then a token, p, **is** true iff p *is* true-at every moment of time real-as-of p.[4] Note that 'real-as-of a time' is taken as a primitive by no-futurists, and I shall not contest this.

Consider the tenseless version of (A):

(B) **Is** this moment PRESENT?

This is Bourne's and Braddon-Mitchell's reading of (A). Their sceptical induction runs thus:

(i)   Exactly one moment **is** PRESENT.
(ii) So almost everyone who **thinks** (at their time) 'this moment **is** PRESENT' **is** wrong.
(iii) So I **am** probably wrong to **think** 'this moment **is** PRESENT'.

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[3]In this passage, 'now' denotes the indexical sense of 'the present'.

[4]i.e. $\forall t$(p, as-of t), quantifying over moments real-as-of p. A referee for this journal noted with surprise that this entails that, for presenists, any true proposition is tenselessly true. However, this entailment is precisely why Bourne and Braddon-Mitchell hold that the sceptical challenge is unproblematic for presentists (see §1).

I accept this argument. But the moral is not that no-futurism is a theory with no philosophical future, but that no-futurists must reject (i). This should not come as a surprise. Consider the sentence:

 (iv) As-of earlier moments, this moment *was* not real.

Suppose tokens of (iv) *are* not always true at the time of tokening. This is only compatible with three alternatives, each of which is unacceptable to no-futurists. The first is straight tenseless four-dimensionalism. The second theory holds that some moment later than this moment **is** time's last moment. That is just another version of (static) four-dimensionalism, with the slightly unusual additional claim that the world **has** only a finite span. The third theory suggests that this moment **is** time's last moment. That is plainly lunatic: only cult-leaders prophesy that time **ends** simultaneous with their speech.

　　No-futurists must therefore accept that tokens of (iv) *are* true when tokened; that as-of any moment, no later moments *exist* or *existed*. (For example, today *was* not real-as-of yesterday.) This requires that the real-as-of relation between moments and events is non-symmetric, i.e. that earlier moments *are* real-as-of later moments, but not vice versa. In that case, (i) is demonstrably false. For example, Sunday *is* real-as-of both Monday and Tuesday, but as-of Sunday, neither Monday nor Tuesday *is* real. So on Sunday, neither Monday nor Tuesday *is* time's last moment; a fortiori, neither **is** time's last moment. Thus anyone who thinks 'this moment **is** PRESENT' **is** certainly (not merely probably) wrong, since no moment **is** PRESENT. (B) becomes a moot question for no-futurists.

　　No-futurists should instead consider the tensed question:

 (C) *Is* this moment PRESENT?

For no-futurists, a token of 'this moment *is* PRESENT' *is* true iff the moment simultaneous with the token *is* time's last moment.[5] Suppose it *is* Tuesday. Since real-as-of is non-symmetric for no-futurists, me-on-Tuesday *was* not real-as-of Monday. Consequently, me-on-Tuesday *was* no counter-example to a Monday-token of 'this moment *is* PRESENT'. On Monday I *am* right on Monday, and on Tuesday I *was* right on Monday. Likewise for all previous persons. Hence, I *have* no reason to believe I *am* wrong when I token 'this moment *is* PRESENT'.

　　It might be responded that any token with the truth-conditions 'Monday *is* time's last moment' *is* false at the PRESENT moment (since it *is* Tuesday). Indeed. But Monday *was* time's last moment when I *tokened* 'this moment [i.e. Monday] is PRESENT'. Me-on-Monday *was* right when it *mattered*, which is surely all that is required.[6] There is no threatening induction.

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[5]This is simply a Tarskian T-schema instance (given the meaning of 'PRESENT'). The solution I present does not generally favour either a token-reflexive or a non-token-reflexive semantics. Indeed, as far as I can tell, no-futurists can make that choice independently of my considerations.

[6]Cf. Bourne's distinction between truth-at and truth-simpliciter (2002: 369).

3   The ineliminability of tense

The preceding solution denies that any moment **is** PRESENT, but requires that every moment either *was* or *is* PRESENT. No-futurists must therefore assume that PAST moments **have** the same intrinsic features as the PRESENT one. Thus, the predicate 'PRESENT' does not indicate a property certain moments *have*, but other moments *lacked*.[7]

Someone might object that, lacking any unique properties, the PRESENT moment is not privileged at all. In that case, 'the PRESENT moment' would seem to be nothing more than an indexical; nothing more than the detenser's 'this moment'.[8] This objection would be erroneous. One cannot infer from the fact that no moment **is** special to the claim that no moment *is* special. For no-futurists, the PRESENT moment *is* the last moment of time. Granted, this is a privilege that every other moment *had*—yesterday *was* the last moment of time, as *was* every preceding day— but only the PRESENT *has* that privilege. Tense is plainly indispensable to this solution. So, with apologies to Tooley, no-futurists must believe that there are tensed facts.

There is a deeper point. It follows immediately from the non-symmetry of real-as-of that there is no unique complete description of reality that **is** true. Instead, different answers must be given at different times to the question 'what *is* real?' This has been the thrust of tensed responses to McTaggart's argument, and it must become no-futurism's response to the Present Problem as well.[9] The only difference is that no-futurists must additionally provide different answers at different times to the question 'which times *are* real-as-of this time?'

4   Conclusion

Bourne and Braddon-Mitchell argued that a sceptical problem arises for those who believe that there are both PRESENT and non-PRESENT moments. This Present Problem dissolves once the problem is disambiguated between tensed and tenseless interpretations and it is recognized that real-as-of is non-symmetric. In brief, there is no reason to believe that we *are* wrong.

Dissolving sceptical worries does not in itself categorically answer (C). To do that I would need to show that PAST people *were*, and that I *am*, invariably correct in tokening 'this moment *is* PRESENT'. This would require that I show time has the structure no-futurists should believe it has (since the truth of all tokens of 'this moment *is* PRESENT' follows immediately from the non-symmetry of 'real-as-of'). But a general argument in favour of no-futurism lies beyond the scope of this paper.

This paper has established only the following. First, there is no sceptical argument against the claim that this moment *is* the last moment of time. Second, no-futurists must take real-as-of as non-symmetric. Third, the (intrinsic) properties

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[7]Cf. Lowe 1998: 47.
[8]Cf. Bourne 2002: 362–3.
[9]Cf. Dummett 1960: 504.

of all real moments are identical. So for no-futurists, all times **are** relevantly like this moment. But there *is* no time like this moment, since only it *is* PRESENT.[10]

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