

Introduction

The moving spotlight theory of presentism is well-known (Emery et al. 2020). In this article I will give an *unmoving* spotlight theory of presentism. It has several components and, I will argue, is more satisfactory than a moving spotlight theory.

An un-moving spotlight theory.

The moving spotlight theory is an intuitive model of presentism. Roughly, there is a block-world timeline, and there is a spotlight that moves along the timeline, and this spotlight delineates the present. As intuitive as this picture is, it is nevertheless beset with problems.

I will assume the block-world is indexed by a B-series and that all locations on this series ‘exist always’ (which I’ll leave undefined for the moment).

There is an acute objection to the moving spotlight theory. It would be supposed that the spotlight is first at a location on the B-series b_1 , and later (where ‘later’ will also be left undefined for the moment) at a location on the B-series b_2 . But then the spotlight at b_2 is just as valid as the spotlight at b_1 . But this violates the ontological privilege of the present in presentism (in which there is one and *only one* present moment). We conclude this theory does not give an accurate model of presentism.

The first issue is that there should be one and only one present moment. But this is achievable. We’ll specify there is an A-series, with a future, a present, and a past. (I prefer a thick present but it’s not strictly necessary.) But this present should not go anywhere: it remains where (when) it is. The spotlight stands still and is un-moving. But then how do we get the passage of time? We can theorize that the block-world moves along this A-series, going past its privileged present. Thus as later and later times become present, time goes on.

At first this seems equivalent to the spotlight moving over the block-world, but it is not. In presentism, times are not merely relational: the present in the A-series is absolute or intrinsic. Thus it makes an ontological difference if there is a collection of presents—each regarded individually, or if there is a single un-moving present.

The second issue is how to describe this movement. This can be solved by supposing that the passage of time is described by an operator that irreducibly *operates*. The operator cannot be modeled by a static mathematical object *in the same ontology* in which the block-world is modeled by a static mathematical object, by fiat.

This might seem far-fetched at first, but it seems to be what’s going on in quantum mechanics. An instance of a collapsing wavefunction (in the present) is described by projecting with an operator in a Hilbert space. Needless to say, if this is the way things are physically then it is metaphysically possible.

The third issue is that the block-world violates the spirit of presentism. If the elements of the block-world ‘exist at all times’ in some sense, then presentism loses some of its soundness. The solution is to drop the requirement of block-world-ness, and instead make the much weaker move of retaining only

the B-series. Then, as the B-series interrelations move along the un-moving A-series, described by an operator operating, time goes on.

This satisfies a subtle requirement. If presentism is correct, then its description, too, must be in the present. That is why the operator *operates*.

References

Emery, Nina, Ned Markosian, and Meghan Sullivan, "Time", Section 9, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2020 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = [<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2020/entries/time/>](https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2020/entries/time/).