**Presentness, Where Art Thou?: Self-locating Belief and the Moving Spotlight**

**Abstract**

Ross Cameron’s *The Moving Spotlight* defends the claim that, of the three most common dynamical views of time—presentism, the growing block theory and the moving spotlight theory—his version of the moving spotlight theory is the best. Cameron outlines his version of the moving spotlight theory and then focuses on some familiar challenges for dynamical theories, in each case attempting to show that his version of the moving spotlight theory does at least as well as, or better than, its dynamical rivals and hence ought be preferred. This paper focuses on Cameron’s response to a particular challenge—*the epistemic objection*. Let’s distinguish between a standard moving spotlight theory (SMST) and Cameron’s version of the moving spotlight theory (CMST). In this paper I consider two of Cameron’s arguments. First, I consider his argument that SMST can successfully resist the epistemic objection. Second, I consider his argument that CMST has an additional avenue open to it in terms of resisting the objection, an avenue which is consistent with CMST having a superior account of truthmaking to the presentist. I argue that Cameron is wrong on both scores.

**1. The Moving Spotlight**

By SMST I shall mean the view that there exists a static four-dimensional block of events such that if an event ever exists, then it exists *simpliciter*, and such that there is a fact of the matter which sub-set of these events is objectively present, (and which past and future)—namely those lit up by the spotlight of nowness—and which events are objectively present changes as the spotlight moves. On this view there is some way that the block is, at each location in the block, regardless of whether that location is objectively present or not, and the way things are, at past locations, makes true past-tensed truths (*mutatis mutandis* for the way things are at future locations).

Contrast this with CMST. On that view there exists a static four-dimensional block. All locations in the block exist, *simpliciter*, and any object that ever exists, exists *simpliciter*. So what exists does not change: but how that thing *is*, changes. For what is the case, *now*, is what is the case *simpliciter*. What distinguishes the view from presentism is that non-present objects exist: objects exist at non-present times, and it is the existence of those non-present objects, *now* being a certain way, that makes it true that they were, or will be, a certain way. Here’s how. Objects have both temporal distributional properties and ages. The former describe how an object is across time; the latter say what age an object has. The former do not change, the latter does. The age of an object, in combination with its temporal distributional property, fixes how an object is, was, and will be. Past- and future-tensed truths about O are made true by O’s *present* instantiation of a temporal distributional property (combined with its age). So, for instance, Caesar exists, and is non-present. Caesar’s temporal distributional property specifies that he has certain properties (his height, weight, mental states etc.) when he is certain ages, and that he has those properties only until he is 55 years old. Caesar is not, now, 55 (or younger). So Caesar is not, now, any height or weight. It is not the case that Caesar *is* some way, in the past. Rather, the way Caesar is, now, makes it true that he *had* a height and weight, but does not make true that he does, in the past, have that height or weight.

In what follows I outline the epistemic objection and explain why Cameron thinks that SMST can resist the objection, before arguing that he is mistaken about this. I then consider how CMST resists the objection, and suggest that it’s being able to do so opens it up to the charge that it does no better than some versions of presentism when it comes to providing truthmakers for tensed truths.

**2. The Epistemic Objection**

Let’s call something a *slice* iff it is a three-dimensional hyper-plane of a four-dimensional block and is such that no two pairs of objects, properties, ore vents, on the slice are time-like separated. Slices, then, are what is, (was, or will be) objectively present. A slice is what exists at a time. So we can map slices to times, so that when S1 is objectively present, the time is t1, and when S2 is objectively present, the time is t2, and when S2 is objectively present, S1 (and hence t1) is objectively past, and S3 is objectively future. We can represent these facts in terms of triples of worlds, slices and times. These triples are like centred worlds, except for having a third index which tells us whether the slice in question is past, present, or future (by telling us what time it is). The triple <w, S1, t1,>, is centred on S1 in w when the time is t1 while the triple <w, S1, t2,> is centred on S1 in w when the time is t2. At the first triple S1 is objectively present, and at the second it is objectively past.

In essence, the epistemic objection arises because in a world such as this, one can know that one is located at S1 (say) but still lack some self-locating information, since one can be uncertain whether S1 is located in the past, present, or future. To see why, notice that in such a world we can ask how things are, subjectively speaking, for some individual, J, located at S1, at the following triples: <w, S1, t1,> and <w, S1, t2,> and <w, S1, t3,> and so on. Let’s call the way things are for an individual at a triple, a *predicament* and call the set of predicaments centred on some individual, J, at a particular slice, S, J’s S-predicaments. We can then formulate the epistemic objection as follows: [[1]](#footnote-2)

*The epistemic objection*

1. If w is a moving spotlight world, then for any arbitrary slice, S, in w, and individual, J, located at S, there are very many more times at which S is not objectively present, than times at which S is objectively present.
2. J’s S-predicaments are subjectively indistinguishable.
3. If J’s S-predicaments are subjectively indistinguishable then J ought assign equal credence to being in each of the S-predicaments.
4. So J ought assign equal credence to being in each of the S-predicaments.
5. Since there are many more S-predicaments at which S is objectively non-present, than at which S is objectively present, J ought to assign very low credence to being in a predicament at which S is objectively present, and very high credence to being in some predicament or other at which S is objectively non-present.
6. If J ought to assign very high credence to being in some predicament or other at which S is objectively non-present, then J is not justified in believing that she is located in the objective present.
7. If J is not justified in believing that she is located in the objective present, then J does not know that she is located in the objective present.
8. Therefore, if w is a moving spotlight world, J does not know that she is located in the objective present.

Minimally amended, the argument yields the same conclusion with regard to any non-presentist A-theory. Defenders of such theories have recently resisted the objection by rejecting II, usually by suggesting that there is no way things seem to J at S when S is non-present, and hence J’s S-predicaments are not subjectively indistinguishable (Forrest 2004) or by suggesting that there is a way that things seem to J at non-present times, but these ways are subjectively distinguishable from the way things seem at present times (Miller 2017).

Cameron argues that even the SMST can resist this argument. The SMST, remember, accepts II. So Cameron aims to show that the argument can be resisted without rejecting II. As we will see shortly, CMST entails the falsity of II, and so Cameron takes himself to have an additional way to resist the argument. Before we turn to consider that way, however, let us consider whether Cameron is right that the SMST can resist the epistemic objection.

**3. SMST and the Same Boat Response**

Cameron offers what I will call a Same Boat Response to the epistemic objection on behalf of the SMST. He argues that the SMST is no worse placed than any other A-theory to respond to the epistemic objection. The response targets presentism in particular, since it is typically assumed that if any A-theory can avoid the epistemic objection then presentism can. Here is the argument:

*Same Boat Response*

1. Either internalism about justification is true, or externalism about justification is true.
2. If internalism is true, then III is true.
3. But if III is true, then if presentism is true we cannot know that we are objectively present.
4. If (3), then the epistemic objection provides no reason to prefer presentism to the moving spotlight view.
5. If externalism is true, then III is false.
6. If III is false, then the epistemic objection fails, and conditional on either presentism or the moving spotlight theory being true, we can know that we are present.
7. Therefore, if III is true, the epistemic objection provides no reason to prefer presentism to the moving spotlight view.
8. Therefore the epistemic objection provides no reason to prefer presentism to the moving spotlight view.

The key premises in need of defence are 2, 3, and 5. I will start off by offering Cameron’s argument in favour of (2) and (3), and later turn to his argument for (5).

Here is why Cameron thinks (2) is true. Suppose internalism about justification is true: justification is a matter of being related to some internal state. *Whatever* the internalist takes this internal state to be, conditional on internalism being true III is true. For instance, suppose the internalist holds that we are justified in believing that P only if we can rule out not P. Then conditional on us being in a moving spotlight world we are not justified in believing we are present since we cannot rule out that we are non-present. But then, Cameron argues (3) is also true. For conditional on presentism being true, we cannot know that we are present. For even in a presentist world we cannot rule out that we are in a world with non-present times, and hence cannot rule out that we are non-present. Here, I think, is something like the argument Cameron has in mind in favour of (3):

*Broadened Epistemic Objection*

1. Assume that w is a presentist world and that it is the present slice is S.
2. Call the total way things seem to some arbitrary J in w on S, ∂.
3. There is a set of epistemically possible worlds in which J at S is non-present: namely all those worlds in which there are non-present times, and J exists at S, and S is non-present.
4. Of the set of epistemically possible worlds in which J at S is non-present, in some of those worlds things seem to J, at S, ∂. Call the set of predicaments at which things seem ∂ to J at S, J’s S-predicaments.
5. J’s S-predicaments are subjectively indistinguishable.
6. If J’s S-predicaments are subjectively indistinguishable then J ought assign equal credence to being in each of the S-predicaments.
7. So J ought assign equal credence to being in each of the S-predicaments.
8. Since there are many more S-predicaments at which S is objectively non-present, than at which S is objectively present, J ought to assign very low credence to being in a predicament at which S is objectively present, and very high credence to being in some predicament or other at which S is objectively non-present.
9. If J ought to assign very high credence to being in some predicament or other at which S is objectively non-present, then J is not justified in believing that she is located in the objective present.
10. If J is not justified in believing that she is located in the objective present, then J does not know that she is located in the objective present.
11. Therefore, if w is a presentist world, J does not know that she is located in the objective present.

A quick note is in order here. I present the broadened epistemic objection in terms of epistemically possible worlds. If one is a contingentist about temporal otology then one can simply run the argument in terms of possible worlds since even if presentism is actually true, one will suppose there to be possible moving spotlight worlds. Thus the idea is that if the Epistemic Objection is sound, then so is the Broadened Epistemic Objection, and so (3) is true.

Now let’s move on to consider premise (5) of the Same Boat Response. According to (5), if one is an externalist about justification one should reject III. Suppose, for instance, justification is a matter of my belief being caused in a reliable manner. Suppose I believe I am in the objective present and I am. My belief that I am in the objective present is caused by me being in the objective present, and that belief is reliably so-caused. Plausibly, then, I know I am present. Of course, those located in the objective past or future also believe that they are in the objective present. Perhaps they even share my justification: perhaps their belief, too, was, or will be, caused by them being in the objective present when they are. But their belief is false, so they do not know they are in the objective present. If, however, each of us can know that we are in the objective present when we are, then we ought not assign equal credence to being at each subjectively indistinguishable predicament. Each of us ought assign high credence to being in a predicament at which we are objectively present. So III is false.

In what follows I argue that Cameron arguments on behalf of the SMST fail: neither (3) nor (5) of the Same Boat Response is true. In the following section I consider (3), before turning to (5) in the section after.

**3.1 It’s Not the Same Boat**

Is (3) true? It is if conditional on the internalist accepting III of the original epistemic objection, she must accept F of the Broadened Epistemic Objection. In what follows I argue that the internalist can accept III but reject F.

Let’s begin by asking what sort of internalist-friendly principle might license III. One possibility is something like the following:

**Strong Indifference Principle:** For all epistemically possible predicaments, P1…Pn, if P1…Pn are subjectively indistinguishable, then any rational agent ought to assign equal credence to each of P1…Pn.

If the Strong Indifference Principle is true then III is true and so is F. But this is a strong principle indeed, and surely much stronger than the internalist ought accept. On the assumption that there are plenty of epistemically possible brains in vats and persons deluded by demons having the same experiences I am, it will turn out that I am not justified in believing that things are as they seem to be. Once I spread my credences over all those predicaments, it will be much more likely that I am located somewhere where things are *not* as they seem, than somewhere where they *are* as they seem. So the internalist has good reason to reject the Strong Indifference Principle. For the same reason, she has reason to reject a similar principle according to which for all possible predicaments, P1…Pn, if P1…Pn are subjectively indistinguishable, then any rational agent ought to assign equal credence to each of P1…Pn. For even restricting the indifference principle to possible, rather than epistemically possible, predicaments will leave the internalist open to serious sceptical consequences.

Fortunately, a weaker principle will do the job of licensing III.

**Weak Indifference Principle:** If predicaments P1….Pn are world mates, and P1…Pn are subjectively indistinguishable, then any rational agent should assign equal credence to P1…Pn.

The Weak Indifference Principle, which is like the principle defended by Elga (2000), does not require that we spread our credences over subjectively indistinguishable predicaments across all possible, or epistemically possible, worlds. It only requires that we spread them over subjectively indistinguishable predicaments *in the same world.* This principle licenses III, but not F. Conditional on J believing, truly, that the moving spotlight theory is true, J ought to distribute her credences over all the subjectively indistinguishable predicaments that exist in J’s world. So J ought give very low credence to being in the objective present; so even if J is in the objective present, she does not know she is. By contrast, if J believes, truly, that presentism is true, she ought distribute her credences across all of the subjectively indistinguishable predicaments. But if presentism is true, there are no subjectively indistinguishable predicaments in which individuals are objectively non-present, and so J ought give high credence to being in the objective present. Hence J knows she is in the objective present.

Since the internalist who wishes to avoid rampant scepticism has reason to accept the Weak Indifference Principle but not the Strong Indifference Principle, she ought conclude that the internalist SMS theorists and the presentist are not in the same boat. Premise (3) of the Same Boat Response is false: it is not the case that if III is true, then if presentism is true we cannot know that we are objectively present.

**3.2 Externalists Aren’t Justified Either**

So far I have argued that internalist SMS theorists are *not* in the same boat as internalist presentists. What, though, of externalists? Let us return to the Same Boat Response and examine premise (5) of that argument. (5) says that if externalism about justification is true, then III is false. For any plausible version of externalism will be one according to which the belief ‘I am present’, tokened when the relevant individual is present, is justified. But is it? I argue that it is not.

Suppose Freddie has the belief ‘I am present’ at S10. Consider, first, whether there is a reliable connection between Freddie having that belief, and it being true. Notice that given the SMST, said belief is tokened at S10 when it is t3: i.e. when S10 is objectively future, before presentness has arrived at S10, and it is tokened at S10 when it is t20, i.e. when S10 is objectively past. Indeed, we can map Freddie’s belief to a truth-value when it is t1, when it is t2, and so on. At each time the belief is mapped to ‘false’, except in the one case in which S10 is present, namely t10. If there are 100 slices in the world, then Freddie’s belief is mapped to ‘false’ 99 times, and to ‘true’ once. On the assumption that a mechanism is reliable only if the ratio of true to false beliefs that it produces is in favour of true beliefs,[[2]](#footnote-3) then the mechanism in question is not reliable. If reliability is necessary for justification, then the belief ‘I am present’ is not justified.

Consider, now, the casual connection that obtains between a token belief of ‘I am present’ and the thing that belief is about: my being present. The externalist might think that the obtaining of this causal connection is necessary (or perhaps even sufficient) for the belief to be justified. Notice, however, that no such belief is caused by the relevant individual being present. Given that the belief is tokened at S10 when it is t1, and presentness hasn't yet reached S10, it cannot be that presentness causes the belief.

Still, the externalist might offer the following objection: III relies on the Weak Indifference Principle. But externalists ought reject that principle because it is insensitive to the different ways in which subjectively indistinguishable mental states are connected to the world, and it is precisely these different worldly connections that the externalist takes to be central to the justification of beliefs. So externalists ought suppose the epistemic objection to be unsound.

There is, however, a principle that licenses III which even externalist can accept. Consider the Weaker Indifference Principle:

**Weaker Indifference Principle:** If predicaments P1….Pn are world mates, and P1…Pn are subjectively indistinguishable, and if P1…Pn are each embedded in the relevant environment in the same manner, then any rational agent should assign equal credence to P1…Pn.

There is no reason why an externalist should reject the Weaker Indifference Principle. She can simply read “relevant environment” as *whatever* features of the environment she takes to be relevant to justification. If those features are the same across some set of predicaments, then it seems reasonable for the externalist to think that one ought distribute one’s credences equally over all such predicaments. So the Weaker Indifference Principle does not say that if I have subjectively indistinguishable experiences from 100 actual brains in vats, I ought to distribute my credences equally over being in each of those predicaments. For I am not embedded in my environment in the same way that each of the brains is embedded in its environment. The principle does say that, (conditional on spelling out the way the brains are connected to their environment in the right way) each brain ought to distribute *its* credences equally over each brain-in-a-vat predicament.

The Weaker Indifference Principle is all the defender of the epistemic objection needs. What is the relevant environment? Plausibly, the aspects of the environment that are relevant are the nexus of causal relations in which a belief is embedded. Then two predicaments count as being embedded in the environment in the same manner, if they bear, to their environment, the same, or very similar. causal relations. Since given the SMST the entire nexus of causal relations is, tenselessly, fixed as part of the four-dimensional block, any two S-predicaments share exactly the same causal connections with any other events in the block. So each of J’s S-predicaments is embedded in its relevant environment in the same manner as every other S-predicament. So according to the Weaker Indifference Principle, J ought to assign equal credence to each of the S-predicaments. So even SMST externalists ought accept III.

Is there another option open to the SMS theorist? Suppose one follows Williamson (2000) in accepting a knowledge first view. One thinks that knowledge is a *sui generis* mental state, and that whether an experience constitutes evidence depends on whether it constitutes knowledge. Then one might argue that since at all of the predicaments in which J is objectively non-present, J does not know that she is present, her experiences at all those predicaments fail to constitute *evidence* that she is present. Thus her belief that she is present is, at those predicaments, unjustified. By contrast, one might think, her belief that she is present in the predicament in which she is objectively present is both true and justified, since at that predicament her experiences *are* evidence that she is present. Hence each of us ought believe that we are objectively present, and hence ought to reject III.

But while Williamson thinks that knowledge is fundamental he thinks that there are constraints on when some mental state counts as knowledge (as will anyone who endorses a knowledge-first view). Williamson takes one such constraint to be reliability, in the form of a safety constraint which he spells out at follows: for all cases α and β, if β is close to α and in α one knows that C obtains, then in β one does not falsely believe that C obtains (Williamson 2000, 128). The idea is that if I actually know P, then in close worlds to the actual world I do not falsely believe that P. When we ask about the safety of some token belief we will usually need to go to a close non-actual world and ask whether in that world that belief is false. That’s because the closest place to find me having *that token belief* in such a way that the belief *could be false,* given that actually it’s true, is in a close non-actual world. In the case of the token belief ‘I am present’, we need not go so far afield: we can evaluate a token of that belief located at S20 in w, at different *times* in w. Could that token easily have been false? Yes, because that token *is false* when it is evaluated at all times but one. This is practically the most unsafe belief I could form. And if that is true then even moving to a knowledge-first approach will not help the SMS theorist since on that view I don’t know that I am present, and consequently I have no evidence for my being present and likewise no justification. Hence I have no grounds to reject III.

So, I conclude, Cameron’s Same Boat Response on behalf of the SMST fails because neither (3) nor (5) is true. In what follows I first consider another response Cameron offers to the epistemic objection, before turning to consider his preferred moving spotlight theory.

**4. A Second Response**

Cameron argues that it is part of the SMST (and indeed, CMST) that each of us is in the objective present; so if we have reason to accept that theory we have reason to reject III whatever our theory of justification. Do we? I think not.

While it is part of the motivation for any version of the moving spotlight theory that we suppose there to be an objectively present time and suppose that time to be now, that supposition does not show up in the SMST. Consider the SMST of our world, @. That theory consists of the set of <w, S, t> triples for every S and t in @. But that set of triples includes nothing that singles out one of those triples as being the way things are *now*. There is no way we could use that theory, were it true, to determine whether the slice we are located at is present. Perhaps, then, Cameron is supposing the SMST to include only a proper sub-set of the <w, S, t> triples: namely all of the triples that focus on a single time, tn, and consider each slice at that time. So, the @ moving spotlight theory is, for instance, the theory that includes the following: <w, S1, t3>, <w, S2, t3>, <w, S3, t3> and so on. This set of triples describes all the slices when it is t3. If we have reason to think that *this* theory is true, then we have reason to think that t3 is now.

This, however, will not do. For then the SMST fails to model temporal passage. According to such a view, the true theory is one according to which a single time (t3) is present. It is no part of that theory that some earlier time was present, or that some later time will be present. In order to capture the dynamism of the SMST one needs to include all of the triples. But once we include all the triples as part of the theory it is not true that the theory itself is one according to which the slice we are on is, *according to the theory itself*, objectively present. Far from it: it is a theory on which any particular slice is mostly non-present. If that’s right then we don’t have reason to think that conditional on SMST being true, we are in the objective present.

**5. Cameron’s Moving Spotlight Theory**

So far I have argued that Cameron fails to show that SMST can resist the epistemic objection. But that still leaves it open that CMST might succeed where SMST fails. For the SMS theorist accepts II: the theory holds that there is some way that things are, at past and future slices. By contrast, CMST denies this. For, recall, Cameron holds that the only way things are, is the way things are now. So for any predicament at which slice S is non-present, the only way things are, at that predicament, is the way they are now. But the way things are now makes true that there were certain mental states tokened at that slice, does not make true that there are, at that slice, mental states tokened. So CMST entails the falsity of II. In effect, there is only ever one predicament over which one can rationally distribute one’s credences: the one that is present. To put it another way, it really is part of CMST that *this* slice is now, since the only slice at which one can be wondering whether or not one is now, is the present one.

The cost to any version of the moving spotlight view that rejects II, however, is that it must therefore reject the claim that what makes true, past (or future) tensed truths, is the way things are, at past (or future) times. If the only way things are, is the way they are now, then it would appear that CMST is no better off, with regard to truthmaking, than is the presentist. Of course, that’s not quite right. CMST, unlike presentism, has no trouble with *de re* past or future-tensed truths, since the relevant objects of predication, such as Caesar, exist. Thus past-tensed truths about Caesar are made true *by Caesar*. Still, what makes is true that Caesar was flesh and blood is that Caesar exists, and he *was* flesh and blood even though he isn’t, *simpliciter*. It’s not so obvious that this is preferable to a version of presentism that says that Caesar exists, in the present, as an uninstantiated haecceity which has the property of *having been* flesh and blood. In both cases it’s true that Caesar *was* flesh and blood, and that the proposition is made true by Caesar. It’s also the case, on both views, that Caesar is not, *anywhere*, flesh and blood. It is going to be a general problem for versions of the moving spotlight theory that reject II that such theories will look increasingly like certain versions of presentism when it comes to truthmaking. That, in turn, is going to risk undermining Cameron’s claim that CMST does better, or at least as well, as all of its rivals in dealing with all of the problems for temporal dynamism.

**6. Conclusion**

CMST affords the moving spotlight theorist a way to resist the epistemic objection. Contra Cameron’s contention, SMST cannot resist the objection. So the moving spotlight theorist has a reason prefer CMST to SMST. Moreover, even if one thinks, like me, that CMST is not preferable to presentism in the truthmaking stakes, this nevertheless makes it a potentially attractive version of temporal dynamism.

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1. Versions of this argument have been offered by Bourne (2002), Merricks (2006), and Braddon-Mitchell (2004 and 2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. I take it this is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for reliability. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)