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**Against Rea on Presentism and Fatalism**

ABSTRACT In [Rea 2006], Michael Rea presents an argument that presentism is incompatible with a libertarian view of human freedom and the unrestricted principle of bivalence. I aim to show that Rea’s argument fails. The outline of my paper is as follows. In Part I, I briefly explain the above three views and I present Rea’s argument. In Part II, I argue that one of the premises of the argument is unjustified.

**Introduction**

In [Rea 2006], Michael Rea presents an argument that presentism is incompatible with a libertarian view of human freedom and the unrestricted principle of bivalence. I aim to show that Rea’s argument fails. The outline of my paper is as follows. In Part I, I briefly explain the above three views and I present Rea’s argument. In Part II, I argue that one of the premises of the argument is unjustified.

**Part I: Background and Rea’s Argument**

I begin by explaining the unrestricted principle of bivalence, a libertarian view of human freedom, and presentism. The unrestricted principle of bivalence is the principle that for any proposition p, either p is true or false. A libertarian view of human freedom affirms two claims. First, determinism is incompatible with the view that humans have free will. Secondly, humans do have free will.

Following Thomas Crisp, I take presentism to state:

It is always the case that, for every x, x is present. [Crisp 2003: 215][[1]](#footnote-1)

Crisp emphasizes that the domain of quantification in the previous definition is wide open, i.e., it includes *everything*. Opponents of presentism will object – they may think that past and future objects exist and may affirm, for example, that

1. For some x, x is a dinosaur.
2. For some x, x is the great, great grandson of George W. Bush.

This is because they think that when you let the quantifiers of these statements range over everything, dinosaurs do exist and somebody is the great, great grandson of Bush (provided he will have such a descendent). Presentists deny both (1) and (2).

This isn’t to say that presentists don’t think that other times exist.[[2]](#footnote-2) It is just to say that if other times exist, then they must exist in the present. One way this could be the case is if other times are *abstract states of affairs* which, though they exist, do not presently *obtain* (though they did obtain or will obtain). These times might include states of affairs like *Lincoln’s signing the Emancipation Proclamation* or *the sun’s rising in the year 2099*. Though these abstract states of affairs have already obtained (or will soon obtain), they exist *now*. Furthermore, though the presentist denies that Lincoln exists, he affirms that Lincoln existed *at a time t*. But to affirm that Lincoln existed at a time t is not to affirm that Lincoln exists – it is only to affirm that *when* the abstract time t obtained, the proposition *that Lincoln exists* was true. Since the present time is the time that obtains, however, Lincoln does not exist. These claims can generalize beyond mere claims of existence. For example, to affirm that Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation at t is to affirm that *when* the abstract time t obtained, the proposition *that Lincoln signs Emancipation Proclamation* was true. Since the present time is the time that obtains, however, that proposition is false. So presentists affirm that a proposition may be true at one time, but false at another.[[3]](#footnote-3)

I will now present Rea’s argument that the above three views are incompatible. Let *t* denote the present time and *t\** the time that obtained one thousand years ago. Let Ps be the tensed proposition *that Sally will stand exactly one thousand years hence*; and suppose that Ps was true at *t\**. My reconstruction of Rea’s argument is as follows:

M1) Presentism is true (Assumption)

M2) Ps was true at *t\**. (Assumption)

M3\*) If presentism is true and if Ps was true at *t\**, then the truth of Ps

at *t\** was not, at *t\**, even partly grounded in the occurrence of any event involving Sally or in any exercising of her agent‐causal power. (Premise)

M4\*) The truth of Ps at *t\** was not, at *t\**, even partly grounded in the occurrence of any event involving Sally, or in any exercising of her agent‐causal power. (from M1, M2, M3\*)

M5\*\*) If the truth of a proposition *p* at a past time *tn* was not, at *tn*, even partly grounded in the occurrence of any event involving S, or in the agent causal activity of S, then S has never had, doesn’t have, and will never have a choice about whether ‘*p* was true at *tn*’ is true (Premise)

M6) Therefore: Sally has never had, doesn’t have, and will never have a choice about whether ‘Ps was true at *t\**’ is true. (from M2, M4\*, M5\*\*)

M7) ‘Ps was true at *t\**’ entails that ‘Sally stands at *t*’. (Trivial)

β3) If *p* and if *x* never had, doesn’t have, and never will have a choice about *p*, and if *p* entails *q*, then *x* never had, doesn’t have, and will never have a choice about *q*. (Premise)

M8) Therefore: Sally has never had, doesn’t have, and will never have a choice about ‘Sally stands at *t*’. (From M2, M6, M7, β3.) [Rea 2006: 518‐519] [[4]](#footnote-4)

The upshot is that the presentist who accepts unrestricted bivalence must reject that Sally freely stands, and this conclusion can generalize to all creatures and all actions. One could deny M1 by denying presentism, M2 by denying unrestricted bivalence, or β3 by denying libertarianism. (Rea assumes that libertarians will not want to give up β3.) The remaining premises are M3\* or M5\*\*, which Rea thinks are very implausible to deny. So Rea concludes that presentism, unrestricted bivalence, and libertarianism are incompatible.

**Part II: Critique of M5\*\***

Before I begin my critique, I must first explain Ockhamism, a view that will shortly become very important. Ockhamists accept a distinction between *hard facts* and *soft facts*, that hard facts are *strictly* about the past (e.g., the proposition *that dinosaurs existed* is strictly about the past), that human beings have no choice about the truth of hard facts, that soft facts are *not strictly* about the past, but are also about times which are not in the past (e.g., the proposition *that God foreknew in the year 1500 that Sam will stand in the year 3000* is arguably not only about the past, but about the future), and that humans can have a choice about the truth of some soft facts. I obviously don’t intend to settle the dispute over whether Ockhamism is correct. I’ll only point out that Ockhamism has been widely defended and that Rea has not presented any independent arguments that it is false.[[5]](#footnote-5)

I will now present my strategy for critiquing M5\*\*. I aim to show that the presentist, libertarian, unrestricted bivalentist (whom I will call the “PLUBist”) does not have reason to think that denying M5\*\* is very implausible. In fact, I will argue that the PLUBist who accepts *Ockhamism* has *good reason* to deny M5\*\*. So I think that Rea’s argument succeeds only if there is a separate argument that Ockhamism is false, and Rea has given no such argument.

The premise under consideration is:

M5\*\*) If the truth of a proposition *p* at a past time *tn* was not, at *tn*, even partly grounded in the occurrence of any event involving S, or in the agent causal activity of S, then S has never had, doesn’t have, and will never have a choice about whether ‘*p* was true at *tn*’ is true.

The PLUBist can rationally deny M5\*\* if he has good reasons to believe the conjunction of the following two propositions:

1) The truth of Ps at past time *t\** was not, at *t\**, even partly grounded in the occurrence of any event involving Sally, or in the agent causal activity of Sally

2) Sally has a choice about whether ‘Ps was true at *t\**’ is true.

Call this conjunction “Conjunction”. I believe that the PLUBist Ockhamist has good reason to affirm Conjunction, and hence, to deny M5\*\*.

First, the PLUBist Ockhamist, in virtue of being a presentist, has good reason to accept (1) for the reasons given above – Sally did not exist at *t\** to ground the truth of Ps. Now the following question arises: if the truth of Ps as *t\** was not, at *t\**, grounded by Sally herself, what could it have been grounded by? Presentists have not been short of giving answers to this question: perhaps it was some presently existing contingent property of a segment of space [Lucretius 1994; Bigelow 1996: 44‐6], a contingent property of the whole world [Bigelow 1996: 46‐8], Sally’s haecceity [Keller 2004], a time in an ersatz B‐series of abstract times [Crisp 2006], a brute future [Kierland and Monton 2007], or perhaps nothing substantive at all [Merricks 2007]. For simplicity, let the ‘presentist package’ denote the set of options that presentists have appealed to or are likely to appeal to in order to provide grounds for past or future tensed truths.[[6]](#footnote-6) The PLUBist has good reason to accept (1), and she can say that what grounded the truth of Ps when *t\** obtained was a member of the presentist package and not Sally herself.

The PLUBist Ockhamist also has reason to accept (2) in virtue of her Ockhamism. She will think that Sally does have a choice about the truth of ‘Ps was true at *t\**’ at the present time. One might be bothered by the fact that this seems to give Sally the power to change the past. But the key Ockhamist point is that this sort of power is not problematic because ‘Ps was true at *t\**’ is not *strictly* about the past, but is also about *t*, the present time; it is about Sally’s standing now. And these are exactly the sorts of facts that Ockhamists have argued that we can have power over. So the PLUBist Ockhamist has good reason to accept (2). It follows, therefore, from the considerations in the previous paragraph and the current paragraph that the PLUBist Ockhamist has good reason to accept both (1) and (2), and so she has good reason to accept Conjunction. It follows, furthermore, that she has good reason to deny M5\*\*.[[7]](#footnote-7)

*Conclusion*

Rea has attempted to argue that presentism, libertarianism, and unrestricted bivalence are incompatible. The PLUBist can, by accepting Ockhamism, block this argument by showing that the denial of M5\*\* is not absurd or implausible. I conclude that it has not been shown that there is an inconsistency in holding these three views unless it has been shown that Ockhamism is false.

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1. It is important to add that “it is always the case” since, if it were absent, proponents of the growing block theory of time would think that presentism was true at the beginning of time (when only the present existed), though it wasn’t true later on. This is an awkward result. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Here, I will mostly follow the presentist account of times in Rea [2006: 512–513]. For more of the subtleties, positions, and debates on the nature of times according to presentism, see Craig [2000: 207–214], Crisp [2003], Rea [2003] Markosian [2004], Crisp [2006] and Merricks [2007: chapter 6]. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. So I will assume with Rea the view that there are tensed propositions which change their truth value over time, aka the view that takes tense seriously. See Zimmerman [2005, pp. 46–47] for argument that presentists (or any A-theorist) must take tense seriously. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. This is not Rea’s argument as he originally states it. In my longer version of this paper, I spend much time showing that this is the best reconstruction of Rea’s argument after various clarifications and disambiguations are made. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. For a defense of Ockhamism and more on soft facts, see Plantinga [1986]. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Perhaps what is common to all of these options is that they “cheat” in the sense appealed to by Sider [2001: 35–42]. For argument that many of these options are not problematic, see Crisp [2006: 93–98]. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. There is much more to be said about this argument. In my longer version of this paper, I respond to three objections. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)