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### **A Solution to the Problem of Singular Propositions and Non-Present Objects**

Presentism is the view that only the present and all the objects within it exist. If an object exists only outside the present then it does not exist. The purpose of this paper will be to examine and propose a solution to the problem of singular propositions and non-present objects for presentism. This problem claims that the non-existence of the past as assumed by presentism means we cannot refer to past objects. In this paper, I will propose that past objects which once did exist have had a lasting effect on the present which allows us, in the present, to refer to those objects indirectly. These effects, which exist in the present and cannot come to be without a cause, allow us to refer to the past object as the cause of those effects. The effect of the past object on the present means that the cause (the past object) has not entirely gone out of existence allowing us to refer to the cause or the past object in the present.

This paper will be divided into the following sections; in section 1 I will provide an introduction to presentism describing its motivations and comparing it to other theories of time, then I will explain the problem of singular propositions and non-present objects which becomes apparent in this theory. In section 2 I will provide my solution to this problem, namely that when you refer to a past object you do so indirectly by referring to the past object as the cause of whichever effects that object has existing in the present. You refer to the past object indirectly through the effects which have the property of being created by said object. I will then look at certain assumptions and justifications for my solution. In section 3 I will review possible challenges to my solution in favour of presentism and try to justify my proposal.

## 1. Presentism as Opposed to Eternalism

Presentism is the view that only the present and entities within it exist. The present can be defined as the edge between the perceived past and the possible future. This is based on McTaggart's A-Theoretic time which structures time as a flow of events running from the future, to present, to past (McTaggart, 1908, p.458). Yesterday, today, and tomorrow, are all tensed ways of referring to time which are in accordance with A theory. In presentism, neither the past nor the future exist at all as they do not exist in the present. For example, as the year is 2024 the president of the year 2050 does not exist. Nor does the President of 1790, as he does not exist in the present he also does not exist. The only President who does exist is the current one of the present, 2024.

How presentism views time is opposed to eternalism which claims that all time, the past, present, and future, is equally real. Eternalism is based on the B-Theoretic structure of time which claims the flow experienced by the A-theorist is only an illusion and all time is tenseless and equally real (McTaggart, 1908, p.458). Time when referred to in tense form such as yesterday, today, and tomorrow, is only due to how we perceive time rather than how time actually is. In reality, time is tenseless and instead exists as Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday. These are two opposing views however the problem of singular propositions in non-present objects only applies to presentism which makes claims about the realness of some objects in time.

## 1.1 The Motivations for Presentism

Both presentism and eternalism have their specific motivations which cause scholars to promote one or the other based on their assumptions about time. However, presentism and the motivations for it seem to be more based on how we as humans intuitively experience the passage of time. Future times do not come all at once but rather one moment at a time, nor can we go back in time and experience anything which has passed. The Eternalist who claims that all time is equally real would be, by extension, committed to the notion that past and future events are re-experienceable. That we can go into a time machine and come out in a future or past time (Lewis, 1976, p.145). This reasoning leads to many different implications such as fatalism as all future events will need to be predetermined, equally real to the present and past. A presentist may then be motivated based on premonitions of free will, the non-existence of the future, and the notion that one cannot reexperience the past. However, Presentism is not without its fair share of challenges.

Let us revisit the President of the present example. The Presentist would claim that the only President to exist (in the role of president as some past presidents still exist in the present) is the current President of 2024. Although it is impossible to refer to who the President of 2050 is because this has not been declared yet, we in fact can refer to who the President was in 1790, George Washington. Is it fair to assume that George Washington does not exist in the same way that the President of 2050 does not exist? It seems that presentism, although plausible with respect to human intuition about the passage of time, faces certain problems.

## **1.2 The Problem of Singular Propositions and Non-Present Objects**

This problem of singular propositions about non-present objects in presentism follows a similar line of reasoning to this concern with past presidents. Presentism claims that objects outside the present do not exist. If this is the case then it seems impossible to have a proposition about an object which does not exist. If an object does not exist as it is only in the past, and it is impossible to refer to non-existent objects, then presentism restricts us from referring to or making claims about past objects. It seems if presentism is assumed then we can no longer claim that Socrates was a philosopher as Socrates is a past object that no longer exists.

Someone might argue, well just because past objects don't exist doesn't mean we can't have statements which include or refer to past objects. Of course, one can still make a statement including a past object. However, the problem is still concerning because statements about past objects under presentism will essentially convey no meaning. For instance, to make the statement 'Socrates was wise', this to the presentist is the same as saying ' $x$  (being any non-existent object) was wise. A possible statement but one with no purpose and conveys no meaning. It seems the presentist must find a way to allow reference to past objects while maintaining that they do not exist in the present and therefore don't exist at all.

## **2. A Possible Solution to the Problem of Singular Propositions and Non-Present Objects**

The solution I propose for the presentist is that while past objects do not exist in the present, it is clear that they did once exist in the present. Their existence means past objects have had lasting impacts on the present so our world would not be the same if they did not exist. This

can still be the case for the most minute changes possible as everything which once existed in the present somehow shaped the present in one way or another. Even if the existence of this past object simply bounced a single photon particle off course, this is enough to justify its existence and the fact that it has changed the course of our world. This minute change having a lasting impact can especially be true if we are to consider the butterfly effect which explains that one small difference in the state of a system could have much larger implications at a later time.

Presentism admits that past objects did exist at one point in time or else they would simply not exist as an object at all. To presentism, as time flows, what comes into and out of existence is constantly changing. Past objects while they existed physically, had some kind of impact on the present simply by existing. Once these objects move from present to past, these objects do not entirely go out of existence as the way they changed the present has a lasting impact. The effect of an object which may no longer physically exist has pushed the present on a certain course and therefore this past object exists more abstractly than physically. Due to how the past object is causally linked to their effects which have changed and morphed the present to be the way it is, we can continue to refer to the past object even if it may not physically exist. If we are to reject the past objects existence then we would be denying the existence of causes of effects on the present. This solution requires a couple of assumptions which I will now justify.

## **2.1 There Is A Cause for Every Effect**

This first postulate needs the least amount of justification so we will discuss it first and assume it as the foundation of my solution. The universal law of cause and effect explains that for every effect there is a definite cause and vice-versa. It is hard to imagine something

happening without first being prompted to happen. In terms of the physical world, it seems then that everything that has ever happened has shaped the present and the way that everything is. As an axiom of causality, nothing takes place without a cause. This can even be apparent in how one thinks, leading them to act a certain way. Even if theoretically there was an effect without a cause we would then not be able to explain the existence of that effect.

If this principle of causality is assumed, then it seems one way or another that everything which has or is happening is caused by everything which has happened before. If this is true then the Presentist must explain how objects which do not exist affect the present. It seems that the solution for this is that these objects causally link from the immediate first cause  $C$  to the first effect  $e_1$  then all the way to whatever effect  $e_x$  that still exists in the present  $P$ . It seems that this reasoning assumes  $C$  still indirectly exists in the present based on  $e_x$  existing in the present. However, If presentism claims that no past objects exist at all and there is no causal link then it seems there would be a whole bunch of present effects with no causes, contradicting the principle of causality which is a much less preferable option for the presentist.

## **2.2 The Effects of Past Objects Can Exist in the Present**

So then let us justify the assumption that the effects of past objects can exist in the present and link back to the first cause, even if to the presentist this first cause no longer exists. Perhaps in this case we can imagine a match and an explosion. The match exists at one time and is lit, then after the explosion which leaves a large hole, the match no longer exists but the effect of the hole still does. It would be hard for the presentist to explain the existence of the hole (effect) without admitting that the match (cause) still indirectly exists in the present. If this

existence is not physical because the match disintegrated and is no longer to be found, the existence of this past object would then have to take some abstract form. It is possible to argue that abstract causes can exist such as thinking about a match which doesn't physically exist leading one to conclude what the explosion was caused by. The abstract idea of the match still existing in the present causes the observer of the hole left by the explosion to have an explanation for the hole. If there was no abstract form of the match the observer would have no cause to refer to as the reason for the hole.

For the purpose of this argument then, we can assume that effects need to exist somehow in the present so that there can be an explanation for why the present is the way it is. To say that these past objects do not exist may be true but referring to the object does not require the physical existence of the object. It only requires the object to be conceptualizable, similar to how we do not need the physical notation of '2' to understand the concept of two. Therefore it seems that the presentist can defend the first claim that past objects do not exist fully but only partially in the present. Therefore we can refer to an object without it needing to be physically existing. As previously mentioned if the Presentist rejects that past object causally links to the present and allows us to refer to them then they would be admitting the existence of many effects without a cause.

### **2.3 Each Present Effect Of A Past Cause Allows Us To Refer To That Cause**

Let us return to our causal linkage example. Every effect existing in the present needs to be linked to some past cause. The first cause which may not exist anymore has changed the present so that it would need to somehow exist for us to explain the current state of the present. If

this existence is abstract like how numbers may exist, then perhaps we can link the existence of the effects of the past object on the present to a non-physical existence of the past object. The past object acts as the first cause which changes the present and leads to one effect directly after it; continuously shaping the present from the very start of its existence. This link could be written as:  $C \rightarrow e_1 \rightarrow e_2 \rightarrow e_3 \rightarrow e_4 \dots \rightarrow P(e_x)$ . These present effects must have the property of being created by their past objects. These effects having the property of being created by the past object allows there to be a causal link from the present to the past object allowing it to indirectly exist in the present through its causes.

It should be noted that when one refers to the past object in the present, they are not referring to the effect of that object which does exist in the present. Rather they are referring to that past object as the cause of this present effect. When one says ‘Socrates was wise’ they are not referring to the effect of Socrates being wise on the present, but instead because Socrates’ existence shaped the present so that it could not be the same without his existence, this lasting impact allows us to refer to a past object such as Socrates as the cause of this present shaping effect. In this sense, it is then assumed that every past object is indirectly still existing in the present through the effects it had. Perhaps this would be unparsimonious compared to the original view of presentism which is that only objects in the present exist. This would essentially multiply the number of entities existing in the present to everything which has ever existed and shaped the present to be the way it is. However, I would argue that this route for the presentist is preferable to claiming that there are no causes for the way the present is and making presentism incompatible with the principle of causality.



### **3. Possible Rejections and How I Would Accommodate Them**

Of course, my proposal is not the only option the presentist has to connect the present with past objects. For instance, Kristie Miller proposes the existence of a set of fundamental particles which have been around since the beginning of the universe. These particles now existing in the present have the tensed properties, for instance, of once existing in a dinosaur (her example). This is what allows the Presentist to explain the existence of and refer to dinosaurs as a past object. She goes as far as to say the Presentist can argue the present itself has past-tensed properties. Therefore one can say that the present moment has the property of being that dinosaurs did exist (Miller, 2013, p.355). Her claim is interesting in that it is conventional with the atomist theory of matter that explains we are all atoms (fundamental particles) which cannot be destroyed but rather continue to change through time. There are for example molecules of water that we drink in the present which have also been through dinosaurs.

Where our positions differ is that she makes her claim about fundamental particles implying a physical continuation of the existence of past particles into the present. Although her view does not admit that past objects still exist, this does admit that past objects still have a physical continuation into the present connected through the fundamental particles that once existed in that past object and passed into another. My proposal that these connections between past objects and the present are not physical particles but the causal linkage to the present of the past object allows the Presentist not to admit the physical existence of fundamental particles from the past. Therefore no past object will have a physical existence. The rest of this section will be dedicated to reviewing other possible rejections of my solution to refer to past objects.

### 3.1 Is This Theory Systematic?

The Presentist can claim that past objects can be referred to as they indirectly exist through their effects in the present, but it seems that this assumption might then be distinguishing between two different types of existence. Intuitively, we can explain the existence of physical objects by referring to them directly. For instance, when we hold a paper in our hands we know the paper exists because we can feel it and refer to it directly. However, it seems that for past objects, we cannot do the same thing. We cannot say that Socrates exists in the same way this paper does because he is not present as the paper is, and therefore we cannot refer to him directly like we can to the physically real paper. It seems that the Presentist might have to admit that past objects need to be referred to based on a different property than present objects. This would cause the claim to be unsystematic.

I propose that we can refer to both past and present objects by their effects or causal linkages which include the object. If we can refer to past and present objects by how they shape the present then this allows the original argument to use the same system of existence classification for both past and present objects. It may be possible that we still refer to present objects directly, but they can also be referred to by their effects. For instance, I know this physically present cup with water in it exists because I can refer to it directly but I also know it exists because I can use it to quench my thirst; and when I knock the cup over the water spills. A point against this proposal would be that this view of causation is not diachronic which states that causation is a relation between cause and effect that unfolds over time. To say that we refer

to present objects by their effects would make causation synchronic, as the relation would be instant in time.

I propose that causation can be both diachronic and synchronic. To justify this proposal imagine how a star shines brightly throughout the universe. It seems that at the same time the star exists, which can be identified as the cause, so does the effect of the star which is the light. Now let us imagine that the star was to suddenly disappear. One could claim that the light of this star would continue to travel throughout the universe. This would be true however at the time of the star disappearing, it would instantly stop emitting light. Although the light emitted from the star may continue to travel, the act of light emission from the star would stop instantly with the star disappearing. The effect of light emission is dependent on the star so if the star were to disappear, so would the effect of the light being emitted instantly with the star not after the star disappears. It seems that objects which intrinsic effects like how stars emit light have synchronic causes and effects. If this proposal is fair then we can assume that causation can be both diachronic and synchronic allowing the presentist to refer to past and present objects through their effects.

### **3.2 What If The Effects of a Past Object Disappear**

If an object exists defined on its effects then we must now consider what would happen if the effect this object has in the present ceases to exist. If this is the case does this mean the object no longer exists and we can no longer refer to it? It seems that with regard to this question, the presentist might have two possible solutions. The first would be to reject that the effect of a past object can be taken out of existence thereby breaking the causal link. These causal links are what

define the present. The other solution would be to accept the premise of this objection and essentially bite the bullet admitting that if a past object loses its effect on the present then we can no longer refer to it. This, however, does not pose a significant problem for my solution as if all effects of an object stop existing such as in the case of a blackout, there would be no ability to refer to past objects with no effect to the present anyway.

### 3.2(a) Solution 1: Effects cannot be taken out of existence

Focussing on the first solution which would be to reject the premise that an effect can be taken out of existence. Doing this would break the link of effects which indirectly keep past objects in the present. However, the Presentist may have concerns with how plausible it is to take the effect of a past object out of existence without running into greater complications. It seems if one effect is taken out of existence this would have a great implication on the way the present is. Let us for instance say that the past object Socrates with his effect on writing and philosophy suddenly stopped affecting the present. It seems like this version of the present would then not include anything which has been directly caused by him, such as any contemporary writing about him. Not to mention this would also alter anyone or anything that is somehow connected to or has been affected by Socrates. Anyone who has ever heard or learned about him would have to be altered to fit this new version of the present. If there needs to be such an alteration of the real version of the present so that this objection may be considered then it seems the Presentist could claim that a past object losing its effect on the present would essentially be very hard to near impossible without drastic changes in the real version of the present.

As the Presentist could claim the implausibility of the effect of a past object being taken out of the present, then we will need to make this objection one of theoretical possibilities. Perhaps we can imagine a world where there is a great reset, and after this reset everything which once influenced the present no longer plays any part in the lives of this new world. This drastic change has reset all the cultural and scientific influences which objects of the past have had on the present. In this theoretical world, it seems that the Presentist would have no choice but to accept that this would not allow anyone to refer to these past objects, however, this admission is not a significant problem for the Presentist.

### 3.2(b)Solution 2: Biting the Bullet

So in this theoretic example, let us say a great societal reset has taken place. It seems it would become impossible to refer to Socrates if he as a past object has ceased to have any effect on the present. However, if a reset has taken place, the impossibility of referring to a past object like Socrates would already be evident in the fact that no one has any knowledge of Socrates. No claims will be made about Socrates if there is a reset and he no longer exists as a historic figure. However, arguing that people would not be able to refer to past objects because they do not know of them or have the means to refer to them seems more like an epistemological issue.

Then what if we were to take the objection in its most raw form, that we simply pluck the effect of Socrates out of existence without considering the greater implications this may have? It seems that only in this case will the Presentist have to bite the bullet and accept that if all influence of an object stops then the object has completely gone out of existence and we can no longer refer to the object in any meaningful way.

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