

Time and Simple Existence

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Abstract

Sceptics about substantial disputes in ontology often argue that when two philosophers seem to disagree on a quantified claim, they are actually equivocating on the notion of existence that they are using. When temporal elements play a central role, as in the debate between presentists and eternalists, the hypothesis of an equivocation with respect to existence acquires more plausibility. However, the anti-sceptic can still argue that this hypothesis is unjustified.

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I

Sceptics about substantial disputes in ontology often argue that when two philosophers seem to disagree on a quantified claim, they are actually equivocating on the notion of existence that they are using. Anti-sceptics have claimed that we have no reason to doubt that parties to disputes understand each other perfectly when they use quantification in stating their positions. I side with the anti-sceptics. However, when temporal elements play a central role, as in the debate between presentists and eternalists, the hypothesis of an equivocation with respect to existence acquires more plausibility¹. Consider a claim such as

(1) There existed dinosaurs

¹ See, for instance, Savitt (2006), Dorato (2006), Meyer (2005) and Callender (2011). Sider 2012: Chap 11 defends an anti-sceptical position, but he acknowledges the further problems that the case of presentism vs. eternalism raises.

For the presentist, the truth of (1) does not require the existence of dinosaurs, but for the eternalist it does require their existence. Now, according to the *anti-sceptic*, it is perfectly legitimate to claim that the eternalist and the presentist construe (1) in *different* ways. Roughly, the presentist takes (1'') as a more explicit formulation of (1), while the eternalist takes (1') as a more explicit formulation of (1):

(1') $(\exists x) (\text{Dinosaur}(x) \ \& \ \text{Located-at}(x, t) \ \& \ t < t_0)$

(1'') WAS $[(\exists x) (\text{Dinosaur}(x))]$

Where t_0 is the time of utterance, and WAS is a primitive tense operator (“it was the case that...”). However, the only fact that makes (1') and (1'') more explicit than (1) is that *both* philosophers take (1') to be committing to the existence of dinosaurs, and (1'') not to be committing to the existence of dinosaurs. (1') and (1'') are the way the eternalist and the presentist respectively talk when they are in the philosophy classroom, and they reciprocally understand their claims and the ontological commitments thereof.

The problem with this anti-sceptic line of thought is that the ordinary notion of existence seems to require reference to the temporal location of the entities to which we apply it to be understood. If the eternalist cannot maintain that dinosaurs exist, but *has to* add “in the past” in order for her opponent to understand her, the claim that (1'') and (1') have incompatible ontological commitments becomes suspicious. After all, the presentist and the eternalist may agree on what is located *at each time*, and if (1') entails that dinosaurs are located in the present, the eternalist should deny it along with the presentist, and if it does not, the presentist should embrace it with the eternalist. The

hypothesis of equivocation is no longer appealing to a stubborn sceptic only: (1') and (1'') are two different ways to locate the existence of dinosaurs in the past.

One may argue that “existence” in ordinary language is not always intended to be temporally qualified. At least as applied to abstract entities, we seem to grasp an *atemporal* notion of existence perfectly. But such a notion is of little use to anti-sceptics. The disagreement between the eternalist and the presentist does not concern whether certain kinds of atemporal entities (numbers or sets, say) exist in the atemporal sense: the issue is whether past (or future) entities exist as the present ones do. The presentist and the eternalist agree that dinosaurs did exist, although *in the ordinary sense* they do not exist any longer. But according to the anti-sceptic they disagree because, *in another sense*, that dinosaurs exist now is true for the eternalist and false for the presentist.

Hence the whole issue boils down to whether we can make sense of this further sense of existence. I think that it is fair to concede to the sceptics that the ordinary notion of existence is always temporally qualified, or—more precisely—tensed. However, it would be overhasty to conclude that the sceptic is justified in her doubts about mutual understanding between the eternalist and the presentist. I argue that we can easily grasp an expert notion of “simple existence” that can do the job of pinning down the distinction between the two positions. I do not know whether other cases of alleged ontological disagreement require some modification to the ordinary notion of existence. In any case, it is likely that whoever can grasp the ordinary tensed notion of existence can also grasp that of simple existence. This is enough to dismiss the sceptical worries as rationally unjustified.

II

First of all we need to distinguish between the notion of *existing-at-a-time* and the *tensed* notion of existence. When we say things like (2) and (3), we are making an *implicit* reference to the present time by using a tensed notion of existence.

(2) Michelangelo's David exists

(3) Michelangelo no longer exists

We can make this reference explicit by resorting to the notion of existence-at-a-time, as in (2') and (3').

(2') Michelangelo's David exists at $*t_0$

(3') Michelangelo does not exist at $*t_0$

(Where $*t_0$ is a standard name of the time of utterance). Note that while utterances of (2) and (3) can vary in truth value as the present time changes (or at least the proposition that they express can), the same does not hold for (2') and (3'). Sometimes such a difference in alethic behaviour is used to distinguish between tensed and tenseless *sentences* (or the propositions that they express). I have no qualms about the terminology, and will apply it. But the distinction between tensed and tenseless *notions* (or predicate) is not to be defined in terms of the alethic behaviour of the sentences containing them as constituents. Tensed notions (or predicates) are those that contain *implicit* reference to the time of utterance. Tenseless notions come in two varieties: those that contain an *explicit* temporal reference to a time, which I call *pseudo-tensed* notions², and those that do not

² Beware of the terminological jungle. Temporal qualifications of this kind, that is, relational qualifications to times or temporal indexing (e.g. *being-red-at-t*) are usually, and rightly, classified as tenseless (Hawley 2001). However, when the explicit temporal modification concerns the copula (*being-at-t*), philosophers usually talk of 'tensing the copula' (Lewis 2001). The slippery talk of pseudo-tense as a tensed notion may be harmless in certain contexts (for instance if the focus is on the temporal modification and not on the implicit reference to the present), but here it is crucial to see that pseudo-tense is a *tenseless* notion. Note also that the taxonomy is not meant to be exhaustive. In particular, we are not ruling out a notion of tensed existence enriched with explicit reference to dates, which is considered fundamental by Tooley (1997 and 2003).

contain any reference to a time at all, which I call *simple* notions. The notion of simple existence is tenseless in this second sense.

This is the proposal. Although the notion of simple existence does not contain any temporal reference, it is conceptually possible that what exists *simpliciter* varies over time, namely that a claim containing an attribution of simple existence be a tensed claim. If we understand such a use of “existence”, it becomes clear where the disagreement between the two parties lies. Presentists think that what exists *simpliciter* changes over time (because for them, only what is present exists *simpliciter*), whereas eternalists think that it does not (because for them, all past and future entities exist *simpliciter* as well). When they disagree on the existence of dinosaurs, they mutually understand each other as using the notion of simple existence. Hence, there are many sentences such as (4) which both the eternalist and the presentist understand and over which ontological disagreement will arise.

(4) Dinosaurs exist *simpliciter*

Both the notion of tensed existence and the two versions of tenseless existence can and usually are used by presentists and eternalists, but it is crucial to be clear on how they understand the entailments between them. Consider the following four notions, the first two of which are tenseless and the last two are tensed:

(A) Simple existence

(B) Existing (being localized) at a time

(C) Presently existing

(D) Having existed

Note, again, that (B)—the *pseudo-tensed notion of existence*—is a tenseless notion of existence, even if, along with (C) and (D) and in opposition to (A), it is temporally qualified. The reason for calling it tenseless is that there is no *implicit* temporal reference to the time of the context (i.e. the present) in B, but only an explicit reference to a temporal location.

Eternalism takes (C) and (D), and tensed existence in general, to be at bottom reducible to (B).

Existing in the present and existing in the past is just a matter of existing at some point in time.

More importantly, (B) in turn implies (A)³, because the eternalist allows herself to quantify over entities no matter where they are located in time. Assuming that the kind of reduction⁴ the eternalist has in mind here is closed under implication, it follows that (C) and (D) also imply simple existence: if something exists now or existed two million years ago, it also exists *simpliciter*.

Therefore, according to the eternalist, there is no temporally privileged notion of existence because every temporally qualified notion of existence (tensed or pseudo-tensed) implies simple existence.

The central notion of existence for the presentist is (C). This does not mean that the presentist cannot allow herself to use notions such as (A) or (B). Indeed, it would be impossible for the presentists to state their position in opposition to that of the eternalist if they did not express it in terms of (A); or, more precisely, if they did not specify what notions of tensed or pseudo-tensed existence imply simple existence. The most important notion of existence for the presentist is (C), present existence, because it is the only notion of temporally qualified existence (tensed or pseudo-tensed) that implies simple existence. However, since presentists maintain that entities that exist

³ I take “(B) implies (A)” to be short for “for any x , the proposition that x exemplifies (B) implies the proposition that x exemplifies (A)”, and *mutatis mutandis* for the other claims of implication.

⁴ There is an issue as to what “reducible” means here. It is well known that it *cannot* mean that the notions are translatable one into the other (Prior 1959, Perry 1977), because we need tensed concepts in order to explain our ordinary behaviour. Roughly, what is meant by the B-theorist is that tensed notions stand only for relational tenseless facts (Mellor 1998, Oaklander 2004).

vary over time, they need both reference to time (in tensed or pseudo-tensed form) and the notion of simple existence to state their ontological creed⁵.

III

I will now consider some objections that a non-stubborn sceptic may raise against the plausibility of my proposal. First objection: since there is neither an explicit nor an implicit reference to a time in the notion of simple existence, why are sentences such as (4) sensitive to the time of utterance? Maybe the temporal sensitivity is in the copula, or in some other sub-sentential constituents of the claim. Whether this is true or not, I think that there is a better response to the objection. When philosophers utter a claim, especially in the metaphysical classroom, they want to confront it with reality. It is because there is a difference in the way the presentist and the eternalist conceive reality (with respect to time) that there is a difference in the way the evaluation of an utterance of the same claim may differ over time, even if it contains only simple notions. The presentist considers the whole of reality to be confined to the present. Contrariwise, the eternalist considers reality to extend also to past and future times. Simple existence, by being devoid of reference to time(s) whatsoever, tracks this fundamental difference between the two views.

Second objection. If *that* is the difference between the presentist and the eternalist, it looks like it has little to do with ontology. The block universe view and the moving spotlight view share the same ontology, while they differ in the way they conceive temporal reality. In the block universe view all times have the same status, whereas in the moving spotlight view what is present changes

⁵ To sum up: for the eternalist, both (B) and (C) and (D) imply (A); for the presentist, (C) implies (A), but neither (D) nor (B) imply (A). What about the implication from (A) to (C)? Given that, according to the presentist, those entities that presently exist are all and only the entities that exist, it follows that (A) implies (C). However, the presentist should not take the entailment here to be a conceptual one, on pain of making the tenets of the eternalist a conceptual impossibility and hence an absurdity. Even if presentists maintain that their position is necessary, they should spell it out in terms of some metaphysical, rather than conceptual or analytical, necessity.

over time⁶. My answer: the moving spotlight and presentism indeed share the idea that the whole of reality change in some fundamental sense as time goes by: what is present *simpliciter* changes over time for both. However, they differ in the ontological consequences of this tenet: according to the presentist, what is present *simpliciter* is also what exists *simpliciter*, whereas according to the spotlight theorist only what is present *simpliciter* – not what exists *simpliciter* – changes over time.

Third objection. The bifurcation of tenseless existence that you propose is artificial. It seems much more natural to stick to the view that tenseless notions are the ones that predicates of atomic tenseless sentences express. If that is true, then there is only one tenseless notion of existence and it can be translated as the conjunction of past, present and future tensed ascriptions – which similarly is guaranteed not to change over time (barring openness of the future for simplicity's sake)⁷. I take this objection to be mere stubbornness on the part of the skeptics. If this is so, I do not have to bother answering. The sceptics may insist that there is no way to a priori guarantee that the two parties really understand each other, but what I care about it is only whether their claim is justified. And in so far as we understand that the expert notion of simple existence I have characterized above does not require implausible intellectual skills, I maintain that the sceptic stance is totally unjustified⁸.

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⁶ See Zimmermann 2005.

⁷ See Meyer 2005.

⁸ Note that if tensed sentences containing an ascription of simple existence can vary truth-value over time, then also whether there is disagreement or not will vary over time. This seems right. Although the presentist and the eternalist now disagree about the truth value of (4), they would have not disagreed if they had been around in the Jurassic.

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