On the puzzle of the changing past

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In the intriguing article *The puzzle of the changing past*, Barlassina and Del Prete argue that, if one grants a platitude about truth and accepts a simple story that they tell, one is forced to conclude that the past has changed. I will suggest that there is a coherent way to resist that conclusion. The platitude about truth is in fact a platitude, but the story is not exactly as they tell it[1].

Let us start with the platitude: when we talk about the past, the truth or falsity of what we say depends on how the past is. More precisely,

(TAP) If s is a temporally specific sentence that is about a past time in a context c, p is the proposition expressed by s at c, and Q is the property that p ascribes to a time t, then s is true in c if and only if t has Q relative to the past of c.

Here 'temporally specific' is intended to mean that, in any context, s expresses a proposition which ascribes a property to a specific time. For example, the following sentence is temporally specific:

(1) Obama was born in 1961

In any context, (1) expresses a proposition which ascribes to the year 1961 the property of being such that Obama was born. Barlassina and Del Prete define a context as an ordered pair of a world and a time. For example, if (1) is uttered now, the context of this utterance is an ordered pair formed by the actual world and the present time. However, from now on the world parameter will be left aside, since no possible world other than the actual world need be considered. To see the plausibility of (TAP) it suffices to say

[1] Barlassina and Del Prete [**?**]. The material of this paper has been presented in 2015 at the University of Padua, at the University of Barcelona, and at the University of Oslo. I would like to thank all the people who raised questions or objections on those occasions. I'm also grateful to José Diez and Giuliano Torrengo for the long and useful discussions we had on this topic.

that (1) as uttered now is true just in case the year 1961 has the property of being such that Obama was born.

Now the story. In 2000 Lance Armstrong is declared winner of the Tour de France by the Union du Cyclisme Internationale (UCI), being the rider with the lowest overall time. In 2002 Frank utters the following sentence:

(2) Armstrong won the Tour de France in 2000.

In this context - call it context A - it seems that Frank says something true. However, in 2012 UCI withdraws all of Armstrong's wins at Tour de France, having discovered that he made use of banned substances. As Frank is not aware of this decision, he utters (2) again later in 2012. In this context - call it context B - it seems that Frank says something false.

The claim made by Barlassina and Del Prete is that, if one grants (TAP) and takes this story seriously, one must conclude that the past has changed. (2) is a temporally specific sentence about the past which expresses the same proposition in context A and in context B, the proposition that Armstrong won the Tour de France in 2000. Since (2) is true in context A, it follows from (TAP) that, relative to the past of context A, the year 2000 has the property of being such that Armstrong won the Tour de France. However, since (2) is false in context B, it follows from (TAP) that, relative to the past of context B, the year 2000 does not have that property. So it seems that, in moving from context A to context B, the past has changed[2].

The objection I want to raise is that it should not be taken for granted that (2) is true in context A but false in context B, for it can coherently be held that (2) has the same truth value in both contexts. This objection may be called the *realist* objection, in that there is a clear sense in which it implies a realist attitude: if (2) has the same value in both contexts, then in one of them things are not as they appear. This means that there may be a gap between what is reasonable to think in a given context and what is true in that context.

Barlassina and Del Prete discuss two variants of the realist objection. The first implies that (2) is already false in context A: Armstrong managed to have the lowest overall time only by cheating, and one cannot be the winner if one cheated. Their reply to this variant is that it is misconceived:

> This objection rests on a confusion, by which the property *being the winner* is conflated with the property *being the person who deserves to win.* True enough, one cannot enjoy the latter property if one cheated; however, one can enjoy the former even if one cheated, since the possession of the property *being the winner* is determined solely by a declaration of a competent authority, and

[2]Barlassina and Del Prete [**?**], p. 61.

> a competent authority may, for one reason or another, declare a cheater the winner[3].

This reply is not watertight. Although the distinction between the property of being the winner and the property of being the person who deserves to win is well taken, it is not obvious that the first property is determined "solely by a declaration of a competent authority". There is a huge variety of cases in which the obtaining of a fact depends on the satisfaction of a set of conditions fixed by convention, and a competent authority declares that the fact obtains even though not all those conditions are satisfied. In some of them it seems right to say that the fact actually obtains, while in others it seems wrong. For example, some violations of the conditions required by a Catholic marriage are normally regarded as inconsequential, while others are not. A case in which the priest is drunk and does not say the appropriate words is normally described as one in which the marriage is still valid. Instead, a case in which one of the spouses hides a previous marriage with another person is normally described as one in which the marriage is invalid. Note that in the second case it doesn't really matter whether the impedment is discovered. The invalidity of the marriage might remain unknown forever, if nobody finds out the spouse's secret. Barlassina and Del Prete provide no reason to exclude that Armstrong's case is like the second case. So it is not obvious that the first declaration of UCI *made* Armstrong the winner. It might be contended that the property of being the winner is not fixed by *fiat*: the question whether Armstrong won does not reduce to the question whether UCI declared that he won. However, I will not press this point further. Since in Armstrong's case, as in many cases, there are no clear intutions, it would be unfair to dismiss the reply provided by Barlassina and Del Prete without exploring the *fiat* hypothesis. For the sake of argument, from now on it will be assumed that the property of being the winner is determined "solely by a declaration of a competent authority".

The second variant of the realist objection implies that (2) is still true in context B: even after the revocation of Armstrong's titles, sincere and informed speakers assert sentences that seem to entail (2), such as

> (4) Armstrong won the Tour de France seven times from 1999 to 2005. He was later stripped of those titles by doping.

To reject this variant, Barlassina and Del Prete argue that such sentences do not entail (2). If (4) did entail (2), an addition of the following sentence would result in a contradiction:

> (5) Armstrong never won any Tour de France in the end.

But the following discourse seems consistent:

[3] Barlassina and Del Prete [**?**], p. 62.

(6) Armstrong won the Tour de France seven times from 1999 to 2005. He was later stripped of those titles by doping. So, Armstrong never won any Tour de France in the end.

More generally, the strategy of considering assertions made by sincere and informed speakers after 2012, rather than supporting the claim that (2) is true in context B, provide evidence for its negation[4].

Here I agree with Barlassina and Del Prete: (2) is definitely false from the point of view of context B. According to the way we see things now, Armstrong never won the Tour de France, and there is no clear linguistic evidence for the opposite claim. Moreover, on the *fiat* hypothesis, it is hard to see how the first declaration made by UCI can override the second, given that the second replaces the first. So, again, this is not the line of resistance that I want to pursue. What I will suggest is that, independently of whether the two variants considered of the realist objection are tenable, there is still a third variant out there.

Let us begin with three assumptions that Barlassina and Del Prete seem willing to grant. The first is that some facts - call them *institutional facts* - essentially depend on authoritative judgements. For example, if Armstrong won the Tour de France in 2000, the fact that he won is an institutional fact, in that it is determined, among other things, by a declaration made by UCI. In other words, institutional facts amounts to properties of times of the kind envisaged by Barlassina and Del Prete.

The second assumption is that authoritative judgements can be *retroactive*, in that they can apply to objects or events located at times that precede the time in which they come in force. This means that an institutional fact that concerns an object or event located at a time t can depend on judgements issued after t. For example, the declaration issued by UCI in 2000 was retroactive, in that it applied to previous events occurred in 2000. The same goes for the declaration issued by UCI in 2012, which applied to the same events.

The third assumption is that authoritative judgements have a property that may be called *overruling towards the past*: if a judgement j is in force up to a time t and then a new judgement j' replaces j, j' overrules j, in that it becomes the only valid judgement after t. In the specific case in which j and j' are retroactive and concern some object or event x, this means that, after t, the institutional facts about x depend only on j'. For example, the decision made by UCI in 2012 overrules the previous decision made in 2000.

Given these three assumptions, it seems correct to claim what follows, in accordance with the *fiat* hypothesis:

(L) If an object or event x is subject to a sequence of retroactive judgements $j_0, ...j_n$ such that each j_i replaces j_{i-1}, the institutional facts about x

[4]Barlassina and Del Prete [**?**], pp. 63-64.

are determined by j_n[5].

Barlassina and Del Prete suggest the following reading of (L): for any context c, the institutional facts that obtain in c - which determine the truth values of the sentences uttered in c - depend on the last judgements relative to c, that is, those that are in force in c. According to them, (2) is true in context A because it is made true by the first declaration, which is the last judgement - therefore the only valid judgement - relative to context A. By contrast, (2) is false in context B because it is made false by the second declaration, which is the last judgement - therefore the only valid judgement - relative to context B.

However, this is not the only admissible reading of (L). Another reading is the following: for any context c, the institutional facts that obtain in c - which determine the truth values of the sentences uttered in c - depend on the *absolute* last judgements, that is, those that are not replaced by subsequent judgements. The difference between the two readings is clear. On the first reading, the *temporalist* reading, the truth value of a sentence uttered in c is determined by the judgements that are valid from the point of view of c. Instead, on the second reading, the *atemporalist* reading, the truth value of a sentence uttered in c is determined by the judgements that are absolutely valid, independently of whether they are valid from the point of view of c[6].

The atemporalist reading of (L) implies a form of *fiat* realism, as it entails that the truth value of (2) is the same in context A and in context B. In both contexts, just as in any context, the truth value of (2) is determined by some institutional fact concerning Armstrong which depends on the absolute last decision issued by UCI. Of course, in context A it is reasonable to think that (2) is true, because the first decision is the only valid judgement from the point of view of context A. Similarly, in context B it is reasonable to think that (2) is false, because the second decision is the only valid judgement from the point of view of context B. But what is reasonable to think in a given context does not necessarily coincide with what is true in that context. In this respect, *fiat* realism is exactly like anti-*fiat* realism, the position considered in connection with the first variant of the realist objection. The only difference is that anti-*fiat* realism requires that the institutional fact that determines the truth value of (2) obtains (or does not obtain) independently of the official declarations made by the competent authority, while *fiat* realism requires that such fact obtains (or

[5]Here it is taken for granted that the sequence of judgements is finite, which is quite plausible in Armstrong's case. Although an infinite process of revision is conceivable, we can leave aside that possibility for the present purposes.

[6]Here the label 'atemporalist' is not intended to imply that the only option or the best option for an atemporalist is to accept (L) so construed. An atemporalist could reject (L), arguing that $n_1, ..., n_n$ are all alike from God's perspective. Torrengo [**?**] defends such a view.

does not obtain) just in virtue of those declarations.

Note that, although *fiat* realism entails that the truth value of (2) is the same in context A and in context B, it does not provide a definite answer to the question whether (2) is true or false. In particular, it does not imply that (2) is false in both contexts. Obviously, now it is reasonable to think that the decision issued by UCI in 2012 is the last word on Armstrong's case. But things could still change in the future. Imagine that in 2020 it is discovered that all the alleged evidence that supported that decision was a clever fake, so that Armstrong really did deserve the title. If UCI issues a new decision in 2020, and that is the last word on Armstrong's case, (2) is true both in context A and in context B.

The best way to make sense of the atemporalist reading of (L) is to think that some past-tense sentences are not *strictly* about the past. To illustrate, consider the following true story. I used to smoke a couple of cigarettes a day, then I quit. One day, in 2010, I was about to take a flight and I decided to start a new life as a non-smoker. So I smoked a cigarette outside the airport, gave the the rest of pack to the first smoker I saw, and I never smoked again after my arrival. Now I can confidently tell you:

(7) That was my last cigarette

(7) is a sentence of the form 'It was the case that p'. However, it is not strictly about the past: whether that was my last cigarette depends on whether I will smoke other cigarettes. According to the atemporalist reading of (L), (2) is similar to (7), in that its truth value depends on what will happen in the future: whether Armstrong won the Tour de France depends on whether the decision issued by UCI in 2012 is the last word on his title. Of course, now it is reasonable to think that (7) is true, just as it is reasonable to think that (2) is false. But again, what is reasonable to think in a given context does not necessarily coincide with what is true in that context[7].

One final clarification. So far it has been argued that (TAP) is consistent with the claim that the past does not change: even if one accepts the *fiat* hypothesis, one can still hold that (2) has the same truth value in context A and in context B. The claim that the past does not change, however, must not be confused with the more controversial claim that the past is necessary, that is, that if it was the case that p, then necessarily it was the case that p. On the atemporalist reading of (L), the latter claim is not to be accepted. In this respect, *fiat* realism differs from anti-*fiat* realism. The necessity of the past does not hold precisely because some past-tense sentences are not strictly about the past. Assuming that there are possible futures in which I smoke and possible futures in which I don't smoke, (7) is neither necessarily

[7] To use Prior's words, there are "traces of futurity" in (7), see Prior [**?**], p. 124. Hazlett [**?**] argues that it is in accordance with common sense to say that facts about the present, or about the past, may depend on facts about the future.

true nor necessarily false. Similarly, assuming that there are possible futures in which Armstrong remains without titles and possible futures in which he regains his titles, such as that imagined, (2) is neither necessarily true nor necessarily false[8].

[8]Prior [**?**] ascribes to Ockham the view that the past is not necessary for the reason considered, p. 121.