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THE MYTH OF PRESENTISM'S INTUITIVE APPEAL¹

abstract

Presentism, the view that only what's present exists, seems to be intuitively very appealing. The intuitive appeal of presentism constitutes a main reason for treating the view as a serious option and worthy of consideration. In this paper, I argue that the appearance of presentism's intuitiveness is based upon a series of misconceptions.

keywords

presentism, eternalism, common sense, intuition

1. The Received View

Presentism is the view that only what's present exists. On this view, merely past entities (such as the dinosaurs or Julius Caesar) and merely future entities (such as human outposts on Mars) do not exist at all. This seems to be a natural thing to think, which makes presentism very appealing at an intuitive level. At least, presentism appears more natural and intuitive, *prima facie*, than its main rival: eternalism. Eternalism is the view that past, present, and future entities exist. On this view, dinosaurs, Roman Emperors, and Mars outposts all exist, just as you and I and the Trevi Fountain exist.

It seems that the intuitive appeal of presentism constitutes a main reason for treating the view as a serious option and worthy of consideration. And, although not all presentists appeal to the apparent intuitiveness of presentism in order to motivate or defend their position, the idea that presentism is more intuitive than eternalism – or closer to “common-sense” than eternalism – has, to my knowledge, never been seriously challenged.

Let's review a few brief quotes to corroborate my claim that the intuitive appeal of presentism is the received view for presentists and non-presentists alike to dispute. That is:

Though I think presentism ultimately must be rejected, its guiding intuition is compelling: the past is no more, while the future is yet to be (Sider, 2001, p. 11).

I endorse Presentism, which, it seems to me, is the ‘common sense’ view, i.e. the one that the average person on the street would accept (Markosian, 2004, p. 48).

The natural, intuitive, view is that the past is not a part of what exists. Indeed, presentism, the view that *only* the present exists, is taken to be our intuitive view of time (Tallant, 2009, p. 425).

The idea that underlies the “received view” (of presentism's intuitiveness) seems simple and straightforward. We naturally tend to think that what's past has existed (it was present), but exists no more, and what's future will exist (it will be present), but doesn't exist yet. And

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presentism fits with this way of thinking: only what's present exists. Thus, we have a natural tendency to incorporate presentism into our ordinary way of thinking.

In what follows, I argue that the received view should be abandoned, since it's unjustified, appearances notwithstanding. Even if our intuitions or "common-sense" support presentism in part, it's not true that common-sense favors presentism over eternalism. It strikes me that, like in other cases, common-sense doesn't coherently (or emphatically) pull in one direction rather than another.²

Here, I understand 'common-sense' to be a set of beliefs that are widely shared among a given group of people. And I will refer to the common-sense beliefs that are, in some sense, suggested to us by our ordinary experience as 'intuitions'. These notions of common-sense and intuitions are neither uncontroversial nor unproblematic. But I take it that such notions should be acceptable to both parties in the debate between presentists and eternalists. Further, I make the following three provisos:

- (a) Cultural and temporal variability. Although there's evidence that common-sense beliefs do vary through cultures and across historical periods, such variation is irrelevant for my purposes here.
- (b) The coherence of common-sense. Intuitions can be incompatible with each other. This implies that, globally, common-sense is likely to be incoherent. Even so, it's possible to individuate and partition elements of common-sense that are coherent.
- (c) The structure of common-sense. We can individuate beliefs that are more or less central to common-sense. Roughly, the more peripheral beliefs (i.e. those that are less central) are those that are easier to reject or else accommodate against evidence to the contrary.

If this framework is accepted, I take it to be uncontroversial that the following claim ("Intuition 1") is part of common-sense:

Intuition 1. What has existed (and exists no more) is not what we meet in the present.

Now, both presentists and non-presentists alike should agree on **Intuition 1**, since even eternalists believe that we *do not (cannot)* meet in the present things that are wholly located in the past. However, since presentism and eternalism are intended to be distinct and competing positions in temporal ontology, they must (substantively) disagree on some claims concerning what exists – in the sense relevant for ontology. Let's suppose that presentists and the rest disagree about what exists *simpliciter* (cf. Sider, 2006; Torrenco, 2012). More precisely, presentists claim that merely past entities (dinosaurs, Caesar, etc.) don't exist *simpliciter*, whereas non-presentists disagree. Non-presentists, such as eternalists and growing block theorists, claim that merely past entities do exist *simpliciter*.

One who defends the intuitive appeal of presentism may then argue as follows. Even if the eternalist agrees that we cannot meet merely past things (in the present), there's a very natural way to read **Intuition 1** that's incompatible with the denial of presentism. What's

2. Common-Sense and One Argument from Intuitiveness

² I remain neutral (at least, until §5) on whether support from common-sense is a theoretical virtue and, if so, how it should be measured against other virtues such as ontological (and ideological) parsimony, simplicity, and other respects of explanatory power. It may well be that intuitive judgement should be disregarded (or else not appealed to) in metaphysics, as Jiri Benovsky (2013) has argued.

required is to construe talk of existence in **Intuition 1** in terms of the more perspicuous (and disputed) notion of existence *simpliciter*. Thus, the presentist's view of temporal ontology can be seen as a transposition in those terms of the ordinary intuition that what's past is no more (exists no longer). In slightly more precise terms, we have the following argument:

- (1) **Intuition 1** should be construed in terms of existence *simpliciter*.
- (2) Thus construed, **Intuition 1** states that what *existed* doesn't exist *simpliciter*.
- (3) **Intuition 1** is incompatible with eternalism.

3. The Eternalist's Rejoinder

Unfortunately for presentists, the argument introduced at the end of the last section isn't very good at all. Eternalists may doubt (1) quite naturally. It seems assured that an eternalist can maintain **Intuition 1** and, thus, agree with the presentist that we don't meet (in the present) entities that don't exist in the present. What our eternalist needs to add, however, is that what's expressed by past-tensed locutions such as 'existed' shouldn't be understood in terms of existence *simpliciter*. This seems reasonable. After all, why should we think that an ordinary intuition about what exists no longer in the present (about what has ceased to be present) has anything to do with an intuition about what exists *simpliciter*? We might well ask if we have any ordinary intuitions about what exists *simpliciter* at all. As I see it, the most straightforward reading of **Intuition 1** is neutral with respect to how talk of (tensed) existence is to be construed within a theoretical framework. And, if this is so, then the idea that presentism entails ordinary intuitions that eternalism rejects seems to be the result of a simple misunderstanding about how to construe properly those common-sense beliefs. More importantly, and apart from the above point, it looks here as if common-sense, as in other cases, comprises intuitions that support contrasting and competing views. For instance, the ordinary notion of existence (such as it is) seems to be captured by common-sense beliefs of the following sort:

Intuition 2. What exists possesses causal powers and is located in space and time (cf. Berto, 2014; Reicher, 2016).

Tacit or unreflective endorsement of **Intuition 2** is why we tend to say that common-sense supports the idea that fictional and abstract entities don't exist. Sherlock Holmes, the fictional detective, lacks causal powers (although a thought about Sherlock Holmes can have causal powers) and isn't located in space or time. By contrast, real detectives have powers and locations. I cannot meet Holmes, much as I would like to. But I can meet any number of real detectives. Something similar is true for paradigmatically abstract entities, such as the number 5 or the empty set. The question arises: can we follow the same line of thought for merely past entities? Our ordinary experience seems to testify to the contrary. It's not only that we think about the past and talk about it with simple ease, we are also directly and indirectly affected by it. We all act on the assumption that what has happened (in the past) led to what's happening now (even if we are not determinists of any stripe). Of course, presentists deny existence to past entities, and have some reason to think that this thought is mistaken, but then this ordinary thought supports eternalism over presentism. There's a tension with the received view when we reflect on the intuitive causal efficacy of the past.

What about location in space and time? Do past entities have it or not? It seems that they do have location in time: they are located *in the past*. Presentists may well claim that it's obvious that we cannot meet past things (in the present) as we meet present things, as **Intuition 1** has it. But the claim that we think of past things as *outside* time seems manifestly false. At any

rate, it's far from clear that the ordinary thought that we cannot meet past things supports the thesis that the past things lack existence in any sense. Indeed, once we reflect on it, it seems to support the claim that past things are in space and time, but located away from us (in a sense). But this is merely a matter of indexicality. The past is never here and now. We never meet past things.

Continuing and developing the point from the previous section, it strikes me as nearly analytic that past things are within time. Although it's perhaps divisive to assert confidently that past things *are* spatiotemporally located, it seems far less controversial to rule out the claim that past things *aren't* so located. If we understand 'abstract' in terms of what isn't located in space and time, the following claim ("Intuition 3") seems to be part of common-sense:

Intuition 3. What is past *isn't* abstract.

Of course, presentists don't need to deny **Intuition 3**, since it's compatible with the idea that what's past doesn't exist at all either. Put differently, presentists can combine **Intuition 3** with the claim that what exists in space and time is restricted to a constantly changing present. Thus, past entities lack spatiotemporal location and lack abstract existence. But again this means that ordinary intuitions fall far short of confirming or supporting the presentist's thesis that only what's present exists (*simpliciter*). **Intuition 3**, by itself, appears to support the claim that past things are concrete (not abstract) and located in time. This claim is distinctly non-presentist. It's compatible with eternalism or growing block.

Common-sense doesn't seem to provide a theoretical advantage for presentism in this case. On one hand, we ordinarily assume that what's past has ceased to be (i.e. has left reality for good), and presentism takes this intuition very seriously. Yet, on the other hand, we accept that the past has an effect on us. And it's more than a little strange to think of something that has an effect on us as utterly outside existence.

From the discussion above, it follows that presentism is more intuitive than eternalism *only if* the ordinary idea that what's past has gone out of existence is more central to common-sense than the idea that the past has a causal effect upon the present. Thus, if it turns out that we are considerably less keen to revise **Intuition 1**, rather than **Intuition 2** or **3**, when confronted with theoretical beliefs that seem to be incompatible with it, then the received view would be vindicated. I take the issue of establishing which intuition is more central, at least in this case, to be a tricky one. Besides, even if we establish which intuition is "more central", whether the centrality of a "supporting" intuition constitutes a theoretical advantage for a metaphysical position still depends on what are the theoretical options at our disposal.

For instance, suppose that the intuition that the present is causally effected by the past is more central (more *fundamental*) than the intuition that the past is gone for good (nowhere and "nowhen"). On this supposition, would eternalism have an advantage? Well, it depends on how well a presentist can explain causal influence from the past without assuming the existence of the past causes (cf. Crisp, 2005). I don't find the presentist account of causation (and the metaphysics of the causal relation) entirely convincing, along with others (cf. Davidson, 2003). However, even if we grant that an explanation can be formulated, it seems more correct to say that presentism and eternalism would be in a stalemate.

Similarly, suppose that the belief that the past lacks existence (*simpliciter*) is more basic in our naive "conceptual scheme" than any "eternalism friendly" intuition to the contrary (and that it can be shown it to be the case). The kind of advantage over eternalism that

4. Further Debunking the 'Myth' of Intuitiveness

5. A Pyrrhic Victory

presentism gains from **Intuition 1** being “core” common-sense would be extremely shallow. The eternalist can accept this fact and explain it away, i.e. explain why it *seems* to us that the past lacks the relevant kind of existence. We don't need to argue for the claim that elements of our best (well-established) science, e.g. the special theory of relativity, confirm eternalism at the expense of presentism in order to deploy this empirically well-confirmed theory in serve of that aim. If one asks *why* we ordinarily think of the past as non-existent, elementary knowledge of physics allows us to explain that it's because we cannot physically effect what's outside the scope of causal relations of our future light-cone (cf. Butterfield, 1984; Callender, 2008).³ Thus, even if presentism *is* more intuitive than eternalism, in one sense, it remains doubtful that this intuitiveness can be regarded as a theoretical advantage at all, because we have a scientifically acceptable explanation of why this intuition can lead us astray. Again, the situation looks suspiciously close to a stalemate.

6. Conclusions In evaluating positions in metaphysics, philosophers sometimes appeal to intuitiveness as a theoretical virtue of some kind or other. Overall, such a stance may be sound. If two theories are roughly on a par with respect to their explanatory capacity (and other theoretical virtues, such as parsimony), then the theory that allows us to retain more from everyday thought and common-sense is preferable.

However, when we make claims about the intuitive appeal of a metaphysical thesis, there should be a clear sense in which the theory at issue is definitively more intuitive than its rivals. In the case of presentism, I've argued that there's no such clear sense. There are indeed certain intuitions that seem to be supportive of presentism, but (i) on the most straightforward reading, they actually support a trivial thesis that an eternalist could accept, and (ii) on the reading in which they are incompatible with eternalism, they are counterbalanced by contrary intuitions which are incompatible with presentism. The intuitive appeal of presentism is a myth. At least, it doesn't confer the motivation typically advertised.

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³ Eternalists often provide error-theoretic explanations of the intuitively less appealing aspects of their theories. See Dyke & Maclaurin's (2002) evolutionary explanation of why the same event elicits different emotional responses from us depending on whether it's past, present, or future; and, see Le Poidevin (2007), Paul (2010) or Torrenco (2017), amongst others, for an explanation in terms of psychology and philosophy of perception of why we have the “feeling” that time flows.

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