

The Truthmaker Objection to Presentism

1. The Truthmaker Objection to Presentism: Consider these two statements:

- (a) Dinosaurs once roamed the Earth.
- (b) The 2020 Olympics will be held in Tokyo.

These are both true. Now, assume that TRUTHMAKER is correct (for every true proposition, there exists some *thing* that *makes* it true). What thing(s) make (a) and (b) true?

Intuitively, what makes (a) true are the actual past dinosaurs that did in fact once roam the Earth. For (b), the likeliest candidate is the actual future state of affairs of the Olympics being in Tokyo in 2020. However, according to presentism, there are no such things. Neither of these things exist. Therefore, it is not immediately obvious that presentism can provide plausible candidate truthmakers for (a) or (b).

This is the truthmaker objection to presentism. [*Note that (b) applies to Growing Block theory—though (a) does not. Eternalism is the only view to avoid this objection entirely.*]

The Truthmaker Argument Against Presentism

1. If presentism is true, then there exist no past things, nor future things.
2. All truths have truthmakers; i.e., Truthmaker Maximalism is correct.
3. Some statements about the past and future are true; e.g., (a) and (b) are true.
4. Statements about the past (and future) are, if true, made true—at least in part—by things in the past (and future).
5. Therefore, there must exist some things in the past, and the future; i.e., presentism is false.

2. Some Potential Solutions: Now, obviously, the presentist could **reject P3**. But, that seems absurd. Surely (a) is true! Are all of the history books full of lies!? Is there no difference between (a) and:

- (a*) Unicorns once roamed the Earth.

Similarly, the presentist could **reject P2**, i.e. Truthmaker Maximalism. Perhaps not ALL truths have truthmakers. As we have seen, some find this an attractive “solution” to the problem that there don’t seem to be any plausible candidate truthmakers for negative statements. But, as we noted then, it seems odd for there to be truths that “float free” of reality, without any truthmakers. Is (a) just a *brute truth* about reality, with nothing in reality that GROUNDS its truth? That seems implausible.

Fictions: Can the presentist could **reject P4**? Here's one way: The following seems true:

(c) Harry Potter is a wizard.

But, surely there is no PERSON named Harry that makes (c) true. Right? What makes it true is the FICTION, created by JK Rowling. According to the fiction of Harry Potter, Harry is a wizard. And that's enough to make (c) true. Could we say the same thing of past events? According to the presently existing fiction of past events (written in history books), dinosaurs once roamed the Earth. And that's enough to make (a) true. This approach is called **Fictionalism**. But, then, we'd have no principled way of distinguishing between what is recorded in Harry Potter and what is recorded in your history textbooks. That seems pretty absurd. Right?

Present Properties: Here's another way to reject P4: (a) is true because the universe PRESENTLY has the property of *previously having contained dinosaurs*. (*This should remind you of the suggestion that the universe also has the property of unicornlessness.*) But, such '**non-categorical**' properties seem pretty suspicious.

Present Traces: We could appeal to the presently existing fossils of dinosaur bones, in the ground and in museums. Could THOSE things make (a) true? Perhaps. But, surely there are lots of true statements about the past which have left no trace or record?

Present Plus Laws: Or, maybe the laws of physics GUARANTEE all events into the past and the future? For instance, perhaps, if we knew every physical fact of the present and all of the laws of physics, we could perfectly calculate what has happened at every earlier moment, and what will happen at every future moment. Objections:

(1) This entails hardcore physical determinism. Is there any room left for free will here?

(2) Many say that laws are facts about patterns or regularities OVER TIME. So, if only the present moment exists, then there could not be any facts about physical laws either.

(3) This reply seems to be confusing the metaphysical question with the epistemological question. Sure, if there WERE such laws and we knew EVERYTHING about them, and the present facts about the universe, we could CALCULATE what happened—i.e., come to KNOW about it. But, are those present facts what MAKES IT TRUE that those past events happened? Rather, doesn't it seem that what makes it true that dinosaurs once roamed the Earth is the past fact that DINOSAURS DID ONCE ROAM THE EARTH?

[What's your view? Is the truthmaker objection to presentism successful? Why or why not?]

A Moral Problem for Presentism

It seems like it would be morally wrong to bury radioactive waste irresponsibly, where it is guaranteed to seriously harm future people; and wrong to gluttonously increase our fossil fuel consumption such that future generations will live in a world wrecked by climate change. In short, it seems that **we have moral obligations to future people**.

Yet, recall the following objection to presentism: *Relations require relata*.

For instance, it seems true that <Obama's death is later than his birth>. But 'later than' is a relational property; and relational properties relate two (or more) THINGS to one another. So, if the statement above is true, given that relations require relata, this seems to entail that both the events of Obama's birth as well as his death EXIST. Eternalists can easily agree. But, presentists have difficulty explaining how the statement above is true.

Griffith's moral question adds a new complication to this objection. 'Having an obligation to' seems to also be a relational property. For instance, if I promise to give Aaron \$20, I am obligated to do so, and I (Chad) bear the relation of 'being obligated to give \$20 to' toward Aaron. But, it's difficult to see how we could have this relationship of being obligated to do certain things for certain people, if those people do not exist!

Some ethicists like to explain many of our obligations in terms of RIGHTS. They might say that future people have RIGHTS, and the actions described above would violate those rights. But, yet again, future persons have rights against present persons seems to be a RELATION. Again, how could this be the case, if one of the relata doesn't exist?

[Note that this is really an objection to both presentists AND growing block theorists, which Griffith lumps together as 'No-Futurists', since both reject the future's existence.]

Some potential solutions: Griffith explores several options on behalf of the presentist.

(1) Certain present actions harm, or violate the rights of, people who WILL exist.

Reply: We'd need an account of how the future person's rights WILL be violated. Presumably, my present action doesn't PRESENTLY violate the future person's rights (or harm them or whatever), but rather does so only ONCE THEY EXIST. So, it is true that <There *will* exist someone whose rights *will* be violated by my present action>. But, what makes this true? (We're back to the truthmaker objection)

Further, it seems like the suggestion is that my present action WILL BECOME a rights violation later, once the future people exist. This sounds like backwards causation!

Not only that, but this also seems to require cross-temporal relations; e.g., in 2100, it WILL be the case that the action of someone in 2000 violates their right, or harms them, etc. Thus, in 2100 there will be a cross-temporal relation between events in 2100 and events in 2000—but, on presentism, in 2100, 2000 no longer exists.

(2) Future people DO presently exist, as abstract objects.

Reply: First, that's absurd. Second, it's difficult to see how abstract objects could have rights, or how we could have any obligations toward them.

(3) We have general obligations to presently do things that result in a better future.

Reply: First, this is to abandon rights theory. Our present actions are not wrong because they violate any particular person's rights. It's no longer even about harming particular people. So, some will find this unattractive. Second, we're still faced with the problem of identifying what makes it TRUE that some actions will result in futures that are much worse than others. Third, this seems like some version of consequentialism, which many will find unattractive.

[Conclusion: Yet another tick in favor of **eternalism** which clearly avoids this objection.]