

Why so Serious? Non-serious Presentism and the Problem of Cross-temporal Relations

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Abstract It is a common assumption in the metaphysics of time that a commitment to presentism entails a commitment to serious presentism, the view that objects can exemplify properties or stand in relations only at times at which they exist. As a result, non-serious presentism is widely thought to be beyond the bounds for the card-carrying presentist in response to the problem of cross-temporal relations. In this paper, I challenge this general consensus by examining one common argument in favor of the thesis that presentism entails serious presentism. The argument, I claim, begs the question against non-serious defenders in failing to account for their wider metaontological views concerning non-committal quantification.

1 Presentism and the Problem of Cross-temporal Relations

Presentism is the thesis that necessarily, everything that exists is present. One well-rehearsed problem for presentism is that it appears to lack the resources to adequately account for the apparent truth of claims involving relations at least one of whose relata are non-present. That is, plausibly, it appears that relations sometimes hold between present and non-present entities. Oft cited examples of such relations are the following: “Lewis admired Ramsey”, “Clinton is of the same political party as JFK”, “Today’s flood was caused by yesterday’s downpour”.¹ The truth of such statements appear to require that both relata exist, thus leaving the presentist in the untoward position of having to say that such statements are, strictly speaking, false. This line of reasoning rests on what has come to be labeled *the principle of relations* and is stated as follows:

¹See Brogaard (2006, pp. 194–195) and Crisp (2005, pp. 5–6), respectively.

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(R) *The Principle of Relations*: Necessarily, if an entity a stands in a relation R to an entity b , then a and b exist.

To many, R presents itself as a Moorean fact, only to be denied at the expense of common sense. Could it be true that Tom bears *the father of* relation to Tim if neither Tom nor Tim existed? It seems not. Consequently, from the truth of presentism, together with R, it follows that such statements are, contrary to appearances, false. Herein lies *the problem of cross-temporal relations* (PTR) for presentism.

2 Non-serious Presentism: The Cinderella of the Metaphysical Ball

One rather obvious presentist retort to PTR would be to deny R and adopt the view known as “non-serious”, “unrestricted”, or sometimes referred to (rather pejoratively) as “frivolous” presentism. Non-serious presentism is the conjunction of presentism with the view that objects can have properties, and stand in relations, even at times when they do not exist. There are few positions in the metaphysics of time that have received as perfunctory an examination as non-serious presentism. To some this cursory treatment is justified, to others it is a crime of injustice. Either way, the vast majority of self-identifying presentists have rejected the view, presumably for one, or perhaps both, of the following reasons.

Many philosophers, most often in passing and without further elaboration, have expressed their concern that non-serious presentism entails some form of Meinongianism. Though it is not always clear what exactly is meant by this charge, an obvious candidate would be that such a view leads to an inadmissible commitment to a modes-of-being ontology. While non-present objects fail to exist (by presentism), they nonetheless have *being* or *subsist* in some sense or other. Given that “Meinongianism” has evolved in recent years into a term of abuse signifying a view harboring unacceptable ontological commitments, it is no surprise that non-serious presentism has received short shrift from philosophers as a viable solution to PTR. Along these lines, consider the following representative statements:

“But few have found non-serious presentism convincing, mainly because it seems to commit us to Meinongian entities.”²

“Some presentists reject the idea that every relation entails the existence of its relata (thereby endorsing a ‘non-serious’ version of presentism), but this seems to involve an ontologically suspicious commitment to Meinongian non-existent entities.”³

“To be sure, some presentists of a more Meinongian bent will see no problem here. But for those suspicious of propertied non-existents, the frivolous presentist’s reply simply is not a serious option.”⁴

With the possible exception of the final statement by Thomas Crisp, the above representative statements suggest that non-serious presentism entails a sort ontological commitment to non-existent objects. Simply stated: if we are ontologically

² See Brogaard (2006, p. 195).

³ See Torrenco (2006, p. 1).

⁴ See Crisp (2005, p. 7).

committed to such entities, and such entities do not exist, then it must be case that such entities have a lower-grade of being distinct from existence (subsistence). Others have charged that the sheer counterintuitiveness of the view renders it unavailing as a solution to PTR.⁵ Representative of this line of thinking is Ned Markosian (2004), “But the response comes with a price...that I personally am not willing to pay. That is, my prephilosophical intuitions commit me not only to Presentism but also to Serious Presentism”.⁶

There have, however, been several substantive arguments leveled at non-serious presentism in recent years that go beyond a mere aversion to Meinongianism or a candid report of one’s intuitions, most notably by Michael Bergmann (1996, 1999) and Mathew Davidson (2003). In this paper, I limit my treatment to Davidson’s contention that presentism entails serious presentism and, in light of this, that proponents of presentism cannot avail themselves of a denial of serious presentism as a way out of PTR.

3 Davidson on Getting Serious

Mathew Davidson (2003) has examined several different presentist strategies in responding to PTR. Here I am concerned with his treatment of a particular version of what he calls the “relational properties solution” to PTR: that the logical form of statements involving cross-temporal relations are not ‘ $R(x,y)$ ’ but rather ‘ Fx ’, where ‘ F ’ serves to denote a one-place (relational) property such as *being taller than Tom* and *being meaner than Leroy*. Relational properties, on this view, do not hold between two (or more) entities, rather, they are monadic and thus exemplified by a single entity.

According to one version of the relational property solution to PTR, a non-present entity, say JFK, would have the property (now) of *being of the same political party as Clinton*. Such a statement is true in virtue of JFK’s presently exemplifying a relational property, *being of the same political party as Clinton*. Davidson contends that this relational property route is not open to the presentist in so far as it is inconsistent with *serious presentism*, the view that objects can exemplify properties or stand in relations only at times at which they exist. In so far as presentism entails serious presentism, adopting the above solution to PTR is tantamount to abandoning presentism per se.

But why think that presentism entails serious presentism? Davidson puts forward the following argument in favor of the thesis that presentism *entails* serious presentism (ET for “entailment thesis” henceforth):

1. Necessarily, for any time t , whatever there is (in as temporally neutral sense as one likes) exists at t . (presentism)
2. Necessarily, for any property F or relation R and time t , if F or R is exemplified at t , there is/are (in as temporally neutral a sense as one likes) something or things that exemplifies or exemplify F or R at t .

⁵ For example, see Bergmann (1996), Bergmann (1999) and Markosian (2004).

⁶ Markosian (2004), p. 310.

3. Therefore, necessarily for any property F or relation R and time t , if F or R is exemplified at t , then F or R is exemplified by something or some things that exists or exist at t .
4. Therefore, necessarily, objects exemplify properties or stand in relations at a time only if they exist at that time.⁷

If successful, ET serves to delineate the presentist camp—who is welcome in the fellowship and who is not—and thus seeks to get clear on the live *presentist* options in responding to PTR. For Davidson, if you want to be a card-carrying presentist, you must get serious.

4 Non-committal Quantification and Non-serious Presentism

Let me be clear about one thing at the outset, I am no non-serious presentist. But often even the most dissenting of opponents is bound, at one time or another, to come to the aid of their interlocutors. Thus, in what follows, I want to come to the defense of non-serious proponents in response to ET. As it stands, ET begs the question against non-serious presentism, or so I claim. In order to see the full weight of this objection it is vital that we first examine the actual details of non-serious presentism as advocated by one of its premier defenders in the literature.

Arguably, the most ardent defender of non-serious presentism in recent years is Mark Hinchliff.⁸ At the heart of Hinchliff's defense of non-serious presentism is the thesis that non-present objects can presently exemplify properties and stand in relations. As a presentist, Hinchliff means by this that *non-existent* objects can presently exemplify properties and stand in relations. In his own words,

Events that do not exist seem to have properties: they are past or future. Objects that do not exist also seem to have properties: Russell existed, wrote 'On Denoting,' and was jailed in 1918.⁹

Here, however, we must proceed with the utmost caution in interpreting Hinchliff's phrase "objects that do not exist". One thing is clear: Hinchliff does *not* mean to espouse the view that though such objects fail to *exist* they nevertheless have *being* or *subsist* in some sense or other. Rather, Hinchliff is explicit that he is no friend of Meinongianism, interpreted as the view that there are various modes of being (existence and subsistence or being). Here Hinchliff is unequivocal, "anyone wishing to draw a distinction between being and existence will not be found on my side of the divide...I want no part of this alleged distinction."¹⁰

But if Hinchliff is no advocate of a modes-of-being ontology, how then are we to understand his claim that a non-existent object can presently exemplify properties and

⁷ See Davidson (2003), p. 87).

⁸ Hinchliff defends non-serious actualism as well as non-serious presentism. I restrict my focus here to the temporal realm. I take Hinchliff as representative here in that (1) his work on non-serious presentism (1988) is, as far as I am aware, the most exhaustive on offer and (2) arguably, Hinchliff is the most oft cited proponent of a non-series reading of actualism and presentism.

⁹ Hinchliff (1988, p. 86).

¹⁰ Hinchliff (1988, p. 106).

stand in relations? Here is a shot: “objects that do not exist” are ones *that do not exist in any sense of the word or have any other sort of being whatsoever*. That is, a non-existent object is just that, an entity that fails to exist or have being *tout court*. For instance, Russell no longer exists or has any sort of being whatsoever. However, he presently exemplifies the properties of *having written ‘On Denoting’* and *having been jailed in 1918*. Consequently, Hinchliff rejects the widespread assumption that in order to predicate a property of an object, that object must exist in some sense or other.

The oft repeated notion that non-serious presentism entails a modes-of-being ontology mistakenly relies on the added premise, nowhere advocated by Hinchliff nor required by non-serious presentism per se, that a denial of R involves positing relata (at least one) that have *being* or *subsistence* instead of *existence*. But this is no part of non-serious presentism, at least as explicated by its foremost advocate. I submit then that the Meinongian suspicion—that non-serious presentism entails a modes-of-being ontology—is without basis.¹¹

Be that as it may, for many the idea of non-existent objects presently exemplifying properties and standing in relations borders on the incoherent. How are we to say in one breath that it is true that there are non-existent objects that presently exemplify properties and stand in relations, where the standard semantics for (objectual) quantification requires that the domain quantified over is one that includes *existing* objects? This brings us to what I believe to be the crux of the issue and what amounts to *the* fundamental insight of Hinchliff’s defense of non-serious presentism that is routinely overlooked by those who are bent on arguing that presentism entails serious presentism.¹²

In his most recent treatment of serious and non-serious presentism, Hinchliff (2010) isolates what he takes to be *the* driving motivation behind the push for serious presentism embodied in what he calls “the triangle argument”, which can be stated as follows:

- A. If ‘Fa’ is true, then there is something that is F.
- B. If there is something that is F, then there exists something that is F.
- C. Therefore, if ‘Fa’ is true, then there exists something that is F.¹³

¹¹ James Van Cleve’s (2006) remarks are fitting (although they pertain to Meinong’s Theory of Objects in particular): “If the real Meinong did not invest his Objects with a second mode of being, why is the impression to the contrary so widespread? There are terminological reasons that may have played a minor role, but I believe the main explanation is as follows. The conviction that things must exist in *some* sense if there are to be truths about them (or if they are to have properties) runs deep. It runs *so* deep in most of us that we tend automatically to ascribe it to others in trying to make sense of what they say. So when Meinong tells us that the golden mountain is golden, even though it does not exist, in the ordinary sense, it must nonetheless exist in some extraordinary sense. Again, when Meinong enunciates his famous paradoxical sentence—“There are objects of which it is true that there are no objects”—we naturally suppose that he intends ‘there are’ at the beginning of the sentence to express a mode of being different from that which is expressed by ‘there are’ at the end of the sentence. We take him to be saying that there are (in the distinctively Meinongian way) objects that lack the Russellian prerogative of existence. It does not occur to us that his initial quantifier may range over things that do not exist in any sense at all” (233).

¹² The same reasoning, I believe, can be applied to Michael Bergmann’s *reductio* against non-serious actualism and presentism in Bergmann (1999).

¹³ This is my formulation of the triangle argument from Hinchliff (2010).

A highlights the intimate connection between predication and quantification: if an individual (a) has a property (F), it must be in the domain of quantification.¹⁴ B, on the other hand, underscores the view, now philosophical orthodoxy, that there is a connection between quantification and existence: an individual is in the domain of quantification only if it exists. It follows from these two premises that in order for the propositional function ‘ Fa ’ to be true there must be some *existing* entity in the domain of quantification that satisfies ‘ Fa ’.¹⁵

The triangle argument underscores the much-neglected point that serious and non-serious presentism rest on wider metaontological assumptions regarding the connection between quantification and existence. Says Hinchliff,

The triangle argument shows that one cannot give up property presentism [serious presentism] without giving up another side of the triangle. I suspect a great deal of the intuitive support for property presentism comes from the role it plays in this traditional configuration. To deny property presentism and keep the other connections in place produces incoherence. So its denial is “absurd” or “bizarre”.¹⁶

As a result, the non-serious presentist, in order to avoid C and thereby a serious gloss on presentism, must deny either the connection between predication and quantification or between quantification and existence.

Hinchliff’s defense of non-serious presentism goes hand in hand with a denial of B: the connection between quantification and existence.¹⁷ He joins the ranks of those philosophers who countenance a non-committal form of quantification: quantification that is bereft of existence assumptions.¹⁸ Hinchliff distinguishes between the *particular* and the *existential* quantifier. The particular quantifier, ‘ Px ’, expresses particular sentences and does not itself carry existential import.¹⁹ The quantificational schema ‘ $(Px)Tx$ ’ is to be understood as the claim that “Something is T ” or “There is something that is T ”, thereby leaving it open whether or not there is any *existing* entity satisfying such a description. Further, Hinchliff takes his particular quantifiers to range over a domain consisting of past, present, and future objects. Again, given his commitment to presentism, this amounts to the claim that the domain of particular quantification includes both existing *and* non-existing objects.²⁰ Thus, ‘ $(Px)Tx$ ’ would be true if and only if some entity over which the quantifier ranges has the

¹⁴ Hinchliff (2010, p. 97).

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 98.

¹⁷ Thus, in the terminology of Eklund (2006): p. 328), Hinchliff would qualify as a “non-commitment Meinongian” in so far as he has “a completely different view on quantification and on the semantic role of singular terms”.

¹⁸ Here he joins the likes of Cian Dorr (2007), Jody Azzouni (2004), Thomas Hofweber (2007), Ruth Barcan Marcus (1972), and Stephen Yablo (2001), to name a few.

¹⁹ It should be noted here that Hinchliff is clear that he takes his particular quantifiers to be objectual and not substitutional. He states, “The distinction between particular and existential quantifiers is also often accompanied by the view that particular quantifiers are substitutional quantifiers. This is not part of my view. My particular quantifiers are objectual. On my view, it is true that some things are nameless, whereas if my quantifiers were substitutional, it would not be true that some things are nameless” (1988: p. 107). For another view that objectual quantifiers can be taken to be ontologically non-committal see Azzouni (2004: 54).

²⁰ Hinchliff (1988, p. 107).

property its predicate stands for.²¹ And, given Hinchliff's view that non-existing objects can presently have properties and stand in relations, this is entirely consistent with $(\forall x)Tx$ being satisfied by a non-present object.

The existential quantifier, on the other hand, is a restricted particular quantifier whose domain of discourse ranges over *existing* objects only. For Hinchliff, ontological commitment is expressed by means of the particular quantifier *together* with an existence predicate 'E'. Thus, $(\forall x)(Tx \wedge Ex)$ as 'Something is *T* and exists' or 'There is something that is *T* and exists' is said to be equivalent to what the Quinean has in mind when she wields the existential quantifier expression $(\exists x)Tx$ as 'There exists something that is *T*'.²² As a presentist, Hinchliff takes existential quantification to range only over *present* objects. Thus, $(\forall x)(Tx \wedge Ex)$ would be true if and only if at least one (presently) *existing* object satisfies the propositional function '*Ta*'. On Hinchliff's view of quantification, then, standard quantificational statements of the form $(\exists x)Tx$ are ambiguous between a particular reading as $(\forall x)Tx$ and an existential reading as $(\forall x)(Tx \wedge Ex)$.

More important to our discussion of ET are the revisionary logical consequences that ensue from Hinchliff's admittance of non-committal quantification. For Hinchliff, the standard first-order quantificational rule of existential generalization (EG) is invalid in cases involving non-present and hence (on presentism) non-existing entities.²³ EG states that from any true substitution instance of a propositional function, *Ta*, one may validly infer the existential quantification of that propositional function, $(\exists x)Tx$. The validity of EG stems from the standard semantics of first-order quantification as, roughly, involving a domain of discourse consisting of existing objects over which one's quantifiers range. The truth of an interpreted statement $(\exists x)Tx$ is then defined as the satisfaction of the formula '*Ta*' by *some existing thing* in the domain of discourse.

On Hinchliff's view, however, one cannot validly infer $(\forall x)(Fx \wedge Ex)$ from the truth of '*Fa*' (where *a* is some non-present object) precisely because the domain of particular quantification includes both existing and non-existing objects. The crucial point here is that Hinchliff's denial of the traditional connection between quantification and existence has the following result: that '*Ta*' can be *true* while $(\exists x)Tx$ (understood as carrying existential import) is *false*.²⁴

Again, it is vital to note that non-committal quantification and the revisionary logical consequences that result from it are part of the metaontological foundations of Hinchliff's defense of non-serious presentism. Without first driving a wedge between quantification and existence it is difficult to see how Hinchliff can maintain that '*Ta*' can be true while $(\exists x)Tx$ come out false. Hinchliff notes,

²¹ It should be noted as well that Hinchliff (1996) is an ardent defender of the notion that one can name and refer to non-present (i.e., non-existent) objects.

²² Hinchliff (1988, p. 106).

²³ The same holds true for universal instantiation as well but I limit by discussion here to existential generalization.

²⁴ Though my aim here is not to examine the merits of Hinchliff's views concerning quantification and the revisionary logical consequences that ensue, an objection here would be that Hinchliff secures the truth of '*Ta*' only by relying on a non-standard conception of truth. Another way of stating this worry would be to say that on Hinchliff's view, truth is not determined by reality (primarily because it can be true that '*x* is *F*', where '*x*' denotes an object that does not exist or have any other sort of being whatsoever).

When we were taught first-order logic, it was supposed that every sentence of the form ‘Something is F’ was equivalent to a sentence of the form ‘There exists something that is F’. We were taught the meanings of the first-order quantifiers by remarks such as that ‘ $\exists x(\text{Rabbit}(x))$ ’ means that there exists something that is a rabbit and also means that something is a rabbit. It was presupposed that ‘Something is F’ and ‘There exists something that is F’ were variant idioms having the same meaning. But perhaps this presupposition of our training is false.²⁵

All this to say that Hinchliff’s adherence to non-committal quantification—together with its revisionary logical consequences—is built into his non-serious presentism from the very beginning and that non-serious presentism stands or falls with the admittance of non-committal quantification.

With that said, let us return to Davidson’s formulation of ET above. It is, perhaps, already clear from what has been said above how ET begs the question against Hinchliff’s non-serious presentism. In moving from (2) to (3), Davidson relies on the universal validity of existential generalization. Thus, from “there is/are something or things that exemplifies or exemplify *F* or *R* at *t*” Davidson infers that therefore “*F* or *R* is exemplified by something or some things that exists or exist at *t*.” But this conclusion only ensues if the standard connection between quantification and existence is maintained and the quantifier expression in (2) is interpreted to include within its domain of discourse existing objects *only*. Then, and only then, does (3) immediately follow from (2). But as is by now evident, this reading of the quantifier in (2) together with the move from (2) to (3) by means of the application of EG is tantamount to a denial of non-serious presentism. Consequently, ET begs the question against Hinchliff and his non-serious cohorts.

Of course, Davidson could retort that ET makes it clear just how revisionary non-serious presentism is, and thus serves as a sort of *reductio* against the view. He might, on this line of thinking, join the chorus of those philosophers who are of the opinion that non-committal quantification is “unintelligible” or “literally gibberish or mere noise”.²⁶ Fair enough. But the point remains nonetheless that to advance an argument against non-serious presentism that assumes that *there is no such quantification*—which is, as we have seen, just to assume the falsity of non-serious presentism—is rather quick, to say the least.

Accordingly, Davidson’s exclusion of non-serious presentism as a way of escaping the grip of PTR is premature. This is *not* to say, however, that non-serious presentism is a stable position in the metaphysics of time per se, only that it stands unscathed by ET (and arguments similar to it in form) and thus deserves a place at the table as a live presentist solution to PTR, even if that place is a less-honorable one.

Be that as it may, non-serious presentism is a far cry from philosophical orthodoxy in the metaphysics of time. Perhaps this is how things should be given the downright counterintuitiveness of the view that objects that do not exist or have any other sort of being whatsoever can, nonetheless, presently exemplify properties and stand in relations. And for what it’s worth, I tend to agree. Nevertheless, any argument

²⁵ Hinchliff (1988, p.104).

²⁶ Terry Horgan (2007, p. 620) and William Lycan (1979, p. 290) taken from Graham Priest (2008).

resembling ET that is bent on showing that serious presentism is entailed by presentism per se must, on pains of begging the question against the non-serious defender, take into consideration the wider views concerning quantification that lie at the root of non-serious presentism.

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