

Is Presentism the Best A-Theory of Time?

Positing that the A-theory of time is true, Dean Zimmerman argues in “The Privileged Present: Defending an ‘A-Theory’ of Time” that of the leading A-theories, presentism is the best. I will disagree with him and argue that the other two theories are just as reasonable, if not more so, to believe. In this paper, I will do three things. (1) I begin by giving a brief exposition of the concepts to be discussed in this paper, including the differences between the A- and B- theories of time and the different versions of the A-theory that Zimmerman considers. (2) I reconstruct Zimmerman’s argument for the thesis *if the A-theory is true, then presentism is true*, emphasizing, as he does, the point of temporal preferences. (3) I evaluate Zimmerman’s argument and contend that he is wrong.

1. Overview of Competing Theories

In the discussion of the philosophy of time, the two leading types of theories are categorized as the A-theories and the B-theories. Before discussing these theories and their differences, we must first look to what it is they disagree about—that is, the A-properties and the B-relations. In short, A-properties are the characteristics of *being past*, *being present*, and *being future*. B-relations are those relations of *being earlier than*, *being simultaneous with*, and *being later than*.

I start by giving an overview of the B-theory. B-theorists view time as a temporal plane on which physical objects and events are located. This is, in essence, an additional fourth dimension to our three-dimensional perception of space. In

their account, when we perceive time, we do not perceive the future becoming the present and the present becoming the past, but rather the movement of the relative temporal locations of the things we are describing to new relative temporal locations. These theorists take the B-relations of *being earlier than*, *being simultaneous with*, and *being later than* as fundamental and the A-properties of *being past*, *being present*, and *being future* as derivative—and relatively so (to the point in time or, in other words, the location on the temporal plane, one happens to be when the description is made). In this essay, I will not consider the B-theory as a viable argument, as it is beyond the scope of the premise of Zimmerman’s thesis, which posits that the A-theory is true. However, it is still an important theory of time to be aware of. With this said, I turn my attention to the A-theories, which shall be the main concerns of this paper.

Contrasting with the B-theorists, A-theorists view time as running from past to present to future. They believe that the A-properties are fundamental. They will assert that the B-relations derive from the A-properties and can thus be reduced to them. These theorists also insist that there is an objective difference in what characterizes the past, present, and future.

Vying versions of the A-theory disagree about what exactly the objective differences between the past, present, and future are. They also have different views about how, if it is so, the present might be “more real” than the past and future. Zimmerman considers three competing A-theories: presentism, the moving spotlight theory, and the growing block theory.

One prominent version of the A-theory is presentism. This is the theory that Zimmerman champions. Like him, supporters of this view are called presentists. They believe that “what it is for an event or thing to ‘move’ from the future into the present, and from the present into the past [...] is to come into existence and then go out of existence” (Zimmerman 214). They take a moment of time to be the sum of all simultaneous events. They also acquiesce that, as Saint Augustine put it, if “neither the future nor the past exist [then] it is not strictly correct to say that there are three times, past, present, and future.” In this view then, since the future and past don’t exist, it also follows that nothing precedes the present and the present precedes nothing.

The moving-spotlight theory is another version of the A-theory. In this theory, all things past, present, and future exist. In addition, like the B-theory, time serves as something like a fourth dimension. Moving spotlight theorists envision the universe’s history as a four-dimensional array organized in a certain order of events corresponding to a timeline running from past to present to future. Additionally, the passage of time is emphasized as something fundamental. Moving over and lighting up this four-dimensional universe is a spotlight denoting the present and giving all that it illuminates the property of presentness, or of being present. This spotlight runs in the same fixed direction as we perceive time: from past to present to future. As C.D. Broad described it, “What is illuminated is the present, what has been illuminated is the past, and what has not yet been illuminated is the future.”

The growing block theory is another view of time. This version of the A-theory considers the history of the universe as a four-dimensional block growing with the passage of time. These theorists contend that only the past and present exist. In their view, the present is a “fresh slice of existence” that is added to the block. It is on the “cutting edge” of this block of existence. Nothing (especially not the future) exists ahead of it. The past is all of the rest of the block that isn’t on the cutting edge. When a moment of time passes, in this view, a new slice of existence is added to the block and it becomes the new present. Nothing changes about the old slice of the present except that it is no longer on the cutting edge.

To summarize, the B-theory says that there’s nothing objectively special about the present, whereas the A-theory says that there is. The three A-theories of time considered in this paper are presentism, the moving spotlight theory, and the growing block theory. Presentism states that only the present exists. The moving spotlight theory accepts the existence of the past, present, and future, but asserts that the present is objectively special in that it is illuminated by the metaphorical moving spotlight. The growing block theory takes it that only the past and present exist, with the present on the cutting edge of the block of existence; the future will exist when it becomes the present and is added to the block.

Now that I have given an overview of the relevant theories and terms this paper will discuss, I will move on to reconstruct Dean Zimmerman’s argument for presentism.

2. Zimmerman’s argument

Zimmerman's argument focuses primarily on the notion of temporal preferences and a feeling that the theory of time we accept needs to be able to explain it. He argues that presentism best does this and gives reasons why he finds the other A-theories lacking, focusing on the subject of intrinsic and essential properties.

Before that, however, Zimmerman argues that we should accept the A-theory because it is part of common sense and to do otherwise would require a great deal of willed skepticism. In this paper, I consider only Zimmerman's argument that *if* the A-theory is true, then presentism is true, and will thus assume the truthfulness of the A-theory for the sake of argument.

Zimmerman brings up the point that our theory of time should account for our temporal preferences in what we experience—that is, when (past, present, or future) we prefer our experiences to be. He contends that presentism best explains this. To illustrate, I will reconstruct his headache example. Zimmerman notes that when a painful experience such as a headache has passed, he is relieved. Similarly, when a pleasant experience passes, he is disappointed. Indeed, most people can relate. We want our pains to be in the past and our pleasures to be in the now. For most people, like Zimmerman, our attitude toward an experience of pain changes from something like unhappiness and annoyance when it is present to relief when it has passed. He argues that presentism best explains this temporal preference.

After all, if only the present exists, then of course we would want it to be filled with pleasures and for pains to be in the past and not even exist at all. As Zimmerman

says, “past headaches do not exist; consequently, they have no properties whatsoever, including being painful” (Zimmerman 216). We don’t enjoy experiencing pain, so it makes sense to want a headache and its property of being painful to not exist.

Furthermore, Zimmerman argues that neither of other two versions of the A-theory can explain our temporal preferences well. He starts by noting that the theories take it that the present is in no sense “more real” than the past and, in the case of the moving spotlight theory, the future. So when things cease to be present, they undergo no intrinsic changes, just relative ones. If the present doesn’t intrinsically change when it becomes part of the past—when the spotlight has passed over it or more slices of existence has been added ahead of it—then past headaches should be just as intrinsically painful now as they were then. If this is indeed the case, then we shouldn’t care if the headache is in the past or present. Yet we don’t feel this is so.

From the case of the headache, Zimmerman jumps to the more complicated case of our mental state of mind. If these states don’t intrinsically change when they become past, he poses, then the beliefs we have about the present and what is presently happening “quickly become mostly false, and go right on being mostly false for all eternity” (Zimmerman 215). Zimmerman believes this disturbing notion induces a sort of skepticism about when the present actually is that makes the theories lose their appeal.

So what if things don't keep their intrinsic properties but instead lose some of them? Zimmerman considers this too, and argues that past things become extremely "thin" in the sense that they lose so much of their essential properties, or what makes them what they are, that it is hard to really consider them the same things.

Zimmerman recounts the views of Quentin Smith and Timothy Williamson, who think that "when objects and events pass from being future to present to past they change in much more than just their A-properties—ie. their presentness, or their degree of pastness or futurity" (Zimmerman 215). For instance, they take it that only present things can occupy space. Future and past things exist, but are non-spatial. Take a table for instance. In this view, it has no mass, shape, or color in the past and future. Thus, objects are also stripped of their intrinsic properties. As Williamson said, "A past table is not a table that no longer exists; it is no longer a table", ceasing to belong to its essential kinds (in this case, the category of being a table).

Other defenders of the moving spotlight and growing block theories argue that some interesting intrinsic properties such as that of being painful require that to be truly painful (or loud or tall or hungry, for other examples) is to be presently painful (or loud or tall or hungry). In this way, things can exist in the past with the weaker past-oriented property of having been painful. This makes sense of our temporal preferences, for though a headache may still exist in the past, it is no longer truly painful like it was when it was present. Thus, as we expect ourselves to be, we are relieved when it ceases to be present, or truly painful.

Though these two views of intrinsic properties changing when something ceases to be present account for our temporal preferences, Zimmerman argues that they do this at the great expense of making the past objects and events extremely “thin”. When objects and events lose their essential properties, it is hard to really consider them to be the same things. For instance, is a past explosion still an explosion if all its energy has dissipated? Is a headache still a headache if it is no longer painful? Is a table still a table if it doesn’t occupy space? Zimmerman asserts that it is not worth making sense of our temporal preferences if it raises such questions of doubt.

To summarize, Zimmerman asserts that presentism is the best version of the A-theory because it easily answers the question of why care that a headache is past without compromising the properties we find intrinsic to it.

3. Why We Shouldn’t Accept Zimmerman’s Argument

Now that I have recounted Zimmerman’s argument for presentism, I will contend that we should not believe his thesis that *if the A-theory is true, then presentism is true*. I do this by first pointing out crucial flaws to presentism corresponding to Zimmerman’s argument, and then go on to argue that the other A-theories have greater advantages over presentism.

My first argument is that presentism is unable to explain our temporal preferences for the future. While it accounts for why we want our pains to be in the past and our pleasures to be in the present, it doesn’t account for why we want our pleasures and not our pains to also be in the future. Because presentism asserts that

the future doesn't exist, it makes no sense for us to want our pleasures to be in a realm of nonexistence. Yet most human beings seem to want this to be the case, anyway. If the presentist says that our pleasures being in the future matters because it will become the present, ie. come into existence, he accepts a passage of time that implies the present, too, will go out of existence and become past. Why, then, if one also cares that pleasures be in the future, care that the present was pleasurable or painful? In a similar vein, this undermines Zimmerman's argument about our preferences for what's in the past. After all, if the past no longer exists, why should we still care about it? Though presentism may be able to explain why our attitudes toward such things as headaches changes when it moves from being a thing of the present to a thing of the past, it doesn't seem to explain why we should still have an attitude toward the past, which, in this view, doesn't exist anymore. Taking Zimmerman's own words, "if a theory of time makes such changes in attitude utterly mysterious, we should have grave doubts about its adequacy" (Zimmerman 214). Though he was speaking of the moving spotlight and growing block theories here, it seems we should have grave doubts about the adequacy of presentism as well.

Another flaw with presentism is that it cannot explain well why the present is the way that it is. Because this theory says that the present is the only slice of existence, and that the past and future do not exist, then we can take it that the present, as in the growing block view, "precedes nothing". This implies that nothing preceded it as well. Accepting this, the presentist shall have trouble explaining causes and effects. In this theory, the present is disconnected from the past and future and stands singularly, individually, on its own as a lonely slice of existence.

This notion then begs such questions as: “How, then, can we plan an event in the future, say, an agenda for a Metaphysics class to be taught tomorrow or a football game to be played next week?” and “Where did this city come from if the past, including the city’s and country’s founders, doesn’t exist?” I argue that this induces more skepticism than the possibility of our old present beliefs being false that Zimmerman noted in his argument. The skepticism produced here suggests something deeper than our old mental states being false; it suggests that, because the past does not exist, many of our old and current beliefs and knowledge are unfounded. I leave it to the presentist to deal with the doubts raised here.

On the other hand, the moving spotlight and growing block theories can better explain and make more sense of the present. These two theories follow a linear view of time in which things and events follow from and build off of one another in a fundamentally connected way. Indeed, this is what we seem to observe. For instance, right now, I am able to drink my coffee as I write this sentence because an hour ago I bought myself this cup of coffee that I am now drinking, and a few minutes ago I started this paragraph that I am now continuing. These past events have been illuminated by the moving spotlight or added to the growing block and exist in a solid way that provides a foundation for the present and future. I will soon finish this cup of coffee and this paragraph.

Another reason why the other two A-theories seem to make more sense of the present is that they allow us to better describe past and future events, whereas presentism rejects their existence and, on a stricter level, our daily use of the concepts of past and future. This particular point, I argue goes against our common

sense. As even St. Augustine said, we use the terms of past and future on a daily basis. It can be sufficiently said that these concepts are part of our commonsense. What has happened is in the past and what hasn't happened yet is in the future. If we were to change this intuitive notion, it would require a great deal of intentional effort. Indeed, if we revisit Zimmerman's description of presentism quoted earlier ("what it is for an event or thing to 'move' from the future into the present, and from the present into the past [...] is to come into existence and then go out of existence"), we see that even he could not help but use these common sense concepts of past and future. On this basis, I argue that my common sense argument goes against Zimmerman's initial premise that the A-theory is true because it follows from our commonsense. I think it is contradictory for him to assert the truthfulness of the A-theory on such a basis when the version of the A-theory he supports goes, in some length, against our common sense and intuition.

The other A-theories, however, allow us to better describe past and future events. In these views, the past has an intrinsic certainty and truth to it. It is crystallized and eternalized in the growing block view and was illuminated in the moving spotlight view. We can thus speak of the past with a sufficient degree of confidence based on our knowledge of history. The future, on the other hand, is still uncertain because it hasn't yet been added to the growing block or illuminated by the moving spotlight. However, it can still be somewhat predicted from the flow of the rest of the four-dimensional array of our universe's space-time history.

As Zimmerman ends his paper, he insists that it remains reasonable for him to believe that presentism is true. However, because of the flaws with presentism in

explaining our future temporal preferences and in making sense of the present slice of existence (ie. why it is the way it is), and the other views' ability to shed light on these challenges, I contend that the moving spotlight theory and the growing block theories are reasonable A-theories as well, if not more reasonable than presentism.

In this paper, I discussed one important debate in the philosophy of time: if the A-theory is true, which is of the A-theories is best? Dean Zimmerman argues that presentism is best and bases his argument primarily around the notion of temporal preferences. He also objects the other A-theories on the basis that they induce skepticism when, in trying to account for temporal preferences, they make past objects and events "thin". After considering his arguments, I disagree with his thesis and contend that the other A-theories are also reasonable to believe.

References:

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