UCC | Department of **Philosophy**
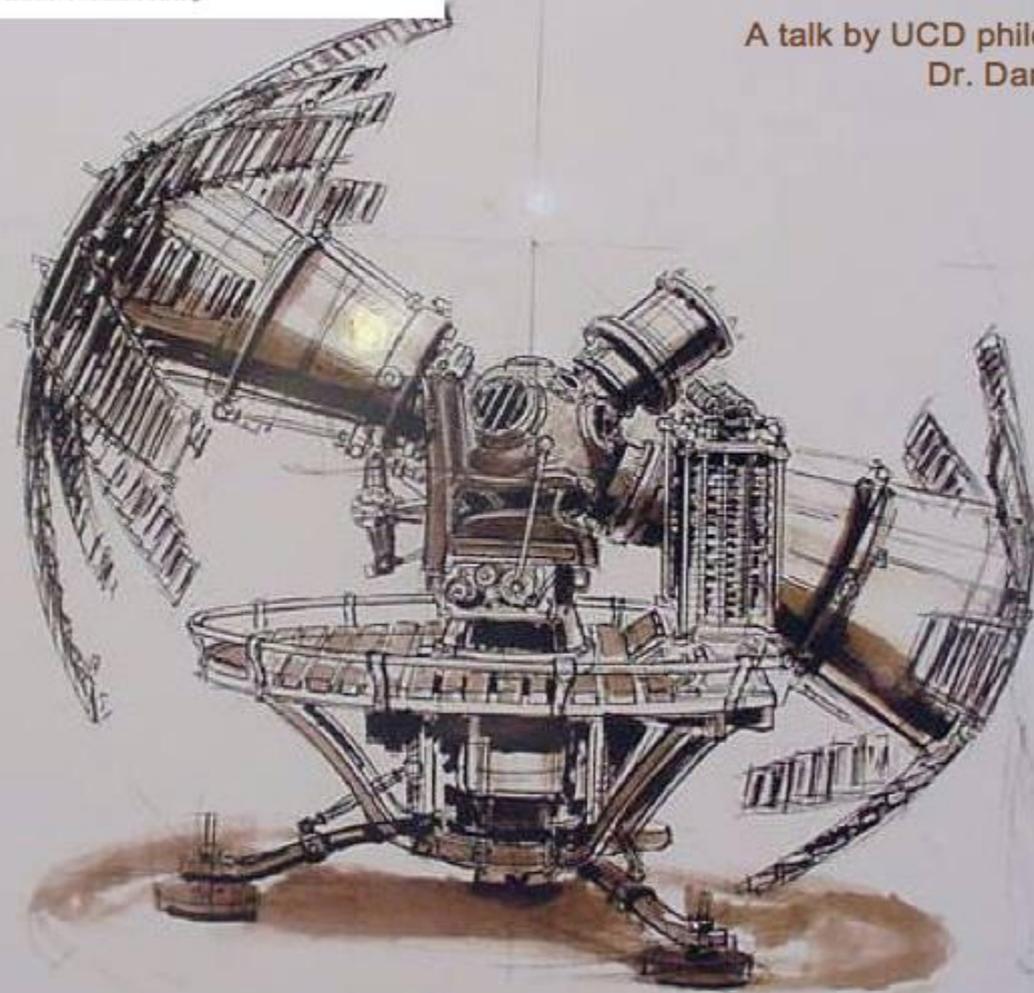University College Cork, Ireland
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

"Talking about the Non-Existent Past"

A talk by UCD philosopher
Dr. Dan Deasy

Nov 13th 4:00
Department of Philosophy
3 Elderwood
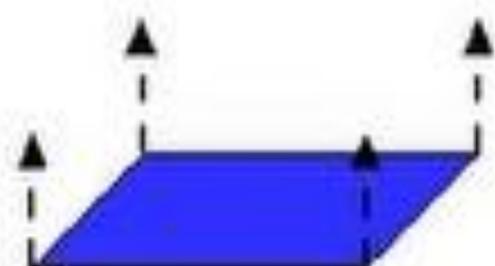https://www.facebook.com/events/157820134569939/

A Theory of Time

- **Presentism** (Prior, Bigelow, Zimmerman)
- Always, everything is <u>present</u>
- Past no longer exists, future is yet to exist
- No dinosaurs (any more) or Martians (yet)
- Every event is absolutely simultaneous
- So STR is false (!)
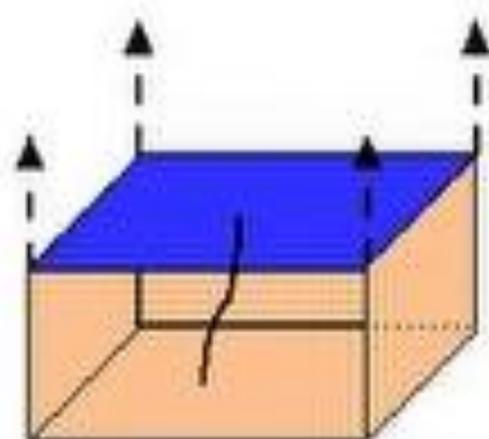- The spacetime model is <u>merely</u> a model

Presentism
"Nowism"

The Present
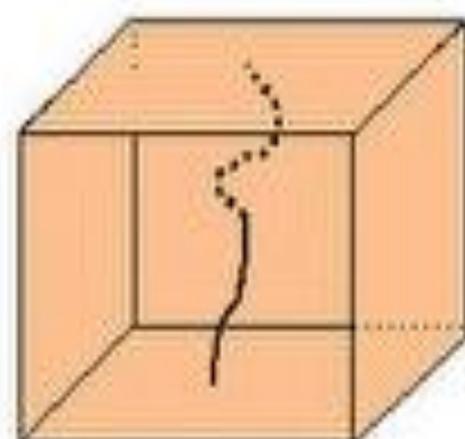
Possibilism
"The Tree Model"

Past & Present

Eternalism
"The Block Universe"

Past, Present, & Future

Don't cry over the past, it's gone.
Don't stress about the future, it hasn't arrived.
Live in the present and make it beautiful.

A Theory of Names

- **Millianism** (Mill, Russell-sort of, Barcan Marcus, Kripke (?), Kaplan, Salmon, Soames)
- The meaning of a name = its referent
- The meaning of 'Joel' is <u>that guy right there</u>
- Usually combined with **Russellianism**
- Propositions are structured entities with objects, properties, and relations as constituents

- "Joel loves Dan" expresses the structured proposition $<<o, o'>, L>$ where o = Joel and o' = Dan and L = the relation of loving
- "I believe that in spite of all its snowfields Mont Blanc itself is a component part of what is actually asserted in the proposition 'Mont Blanc is more than 4,000 metres high'" (Russell to Frege)
- Referents of proper names are 'right there, trapped in a proposition' (Kaplan 1979)

- Why Millian-Russellianism?
- Alternative: some kind of Fregeanism
- **Fregeanism**: the meaning of a proper name is its <u>sense</u>
- Sense (i) determines reference and (ii) captures cognitive significance
- **Description Theory**: the meaning of a proper name is some definite description the *F*
- E.g. 'George Boole' means: the first professor of maths at UCC

- Kripke and Donnellan
- **The Modal Argument**:

  (1) GB might not have been the first professor of maths at UCC

  (2) GB might not have been GB
- **The Epistemic Argument**

  (3) GB is the first professor of maths at UCC
- **The Semantic Argument**

  (4) Peano is the discoverer of the Peano axioms

The Problem

- (1) Boole was wise

  (2) The proposition [that Boole was wise] is true

  (3) The proposition [that Boole was wise] exists

  (4) Boole exists

- Millian-Russellianism licences the move from (3) to (4)

- Presentists (usually) reject (4)

Solutions

- **Bullet Biting**
- Boole does not exist (given presentism) so 'Boole' has no meaning (given Millianism)
- But then 'Boole was wise' has no meaning
- Okay fine…
- But 'Boole was wise' does have a meaning!
- Speakers can use 'Boole was wise' to communicate, convey thoughts, express beliefs; how?

- **Targeted Descriptivism**
- Millianism for present objects + descriptivism for non-present objects
- 'Boole' means Boole when Boole exists; means 'the first professor of maths at UCC' when Boole doesn't exist
- 'Boole was wise' expresses the true proposition [that <u>it was the case that </u>the first professor of maths at UCC is wise]
- Presentist friendly (compare: <u>it could be that </u>there are unicorns)

"Can a statement really be *about* Queen Anne after she has ceased to be? An alternative solution is worth mentioning. We might paraphrase 'Queen Anne has died' as 'Once there was a person named "Anne", who reigned over England, etc., but there is not now any such person'" (Prior 1968, 17)

- But Kripke's anti-descriptivist arguments are just as good for non-present objects
- Also, there is the puzzle of <u>meaning change</u> (Markosian 2004)
- Names change their meaning when objects cease to exist
- The contents of beliefs change when objects cease to exist
- **Two problems**: (i) basis of beliefs and (ii) self-knowledge and reporting

- At *t*1 on June 5 2004 I believe [that Reagan was president]
- At *t*2 on June 5 2004 I believe [that the *D* was president]
- No relevant change in my internal states
- No relevant change in the interpretation of the English language
- So why the difference in my beliefs?
- **Externalist response**: a change in what exists *can be* a change in the relevant interpretation of the language/change in my internal states

- **Self-knowledge and reporting**
- Things can cease to exist without my knowing
- So the contents of my thoughts can change without my knowing
- So I could easily be wrong about what I think
- 'Gorbachev said that Reagan was a great President'
- I can't report accurately!

- **Gappy propositions**
- Kaplan, Braun, Salmon*
- 'Boole was wise' expresses a structured proposition with a gap: <WAS, _____, *Wisdom*>
- Truth-value? (Braun: false; Salmon: none)
- "Severely disabled, the partially formed product of a failed attempt to construct a true-or-false proposition, something whose cognitive and semantic function is that of a truth-valued proposition but is unable to fulfil its function for lack of an essential component"(Salmon)

- But 'Boole was wise' is true!
- 'Boole was wise' and 'Socrates was wise' express the same (gappy) proposition; so how do they manage to convey different thoughts?
- They convey different <u>descriptive</u> propositions (Taylor)
- But then the problems with descriptivism might return (Caplan)
- Can structured propositions really have 'gaps'?

- **Essences**
- Robert Adams (<u>thisnesses</u>) and Alvin Plantinga (<u>haecceities</u>)
- The meaning of a proper name = a description involving a thing's essence
- 'Boole' means the thing that has Boolocity
- Boolocity is a property *F* that <u>Boole and only Boole can possibly have</u>
- Essences are eternal, abstract things

- Avoids the problems with standard descriptivism (Boole must have Boolocity)
- Avoids the problem of meaning change
- But only at the cost of my being unable to refer directly to Joel
- Can we really have Boolocity without Boole?
- Best candidate: the property of <u>being identical with Boole</u>. But this involves Boole!
- Primitive Boolocity?

- General Problem: anything that can successfully stand in for Boole must bear some relation to Boole

- **R- Being Constraint**: If any things ever stand in a relation, they exist

- Ditch the R-Being Constraint? (Then we don't need essences!)

- 'Boole' can refer to Boole without Boole existing

- Boole can be a constituent of the proposition [that Boole was wise] without existing

- The proposition [that Boole was wise] can be true without existing (blocking (2) to (3))

- "Some may balk at my proposal on the grounds that it conflicts with the metaphysical principle that any object must exist in every conceivable circumstance in which that objects has any properties. This principle… is a confused and misguided prejudice… the sweeping doctrine that existence universally precedes suchness has very clear counterexamples… Socrates does not exist in my present circumstance, yet he has numerous properties here—for example, being mentioned and discussed by me." (Salmon 1998, 290-1)

Thank you!