What is Presentism?

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1. Introduction: The Standard Definition of Presentism

Presentism is a widely discussed theory of time. But what exactly *is* the thesis of presentism? Presentism is usually defined in the literature as something like the thesis that it is always the case that everything is present. Let us call this *the standard definition of presentism* (just *the standard definition* from now on):

**Presentism- Standard Definition:** Always everything is present

**Formally:** \( A \forall x \text{Present}(x) \)

It is worth making two points about this definition:

(i) First, some hold that presentism is a necessarily true if true (see, for example, Theodore Sider (1999, 2)), while others hold that it is contingently true if true (see, for example, Thomas Crisp (2003, 215). Crisp writes: “The reasons I know of for being a presentist offer no reason at all for thinking presentism is a necessary truth.”). Whether presentism is necessary or contingent has no bearing on what follows, so I will continue to operate with the modally non-committal standard definition.
(ii) Second, there is a question about whether the individual quantifier ‘everything’ in the standard definition should be read as restricted or unrestricted. The natural thing to say is that the quantifier is unrestricted (this is Crisp’s (2004, 37) view, for example). However, if the quantifier is unrestricted it follows that if there are abstract things, abstract things are present. But some presentists who believe in abstract things might wish to deny that abstract things (or just some abstract things) can bear temporal properties such as being present, perhaps because they think that abstract things (or just some abstract things) are atemporal in a sense that precludes bearing temporal properties. Such presentists will probably recommend that the quantifier in the standard definition be read as restricted to non-abstract things (or to temporal things); otherwise, if there are abstract things (or atemporal things) then presentism is false, and if abstract things (or atemporal things) are necessarily abstract (or atemporal), then if there are abstract things (or atemporal things) presentism is necessarily false.

The question of whether the quantifier in the standard definition should be read as restricted or unrestricted really depends on what it is for something to be present. For example, suppose that something is present iff it is spatially located.¹ In that case, if there are abstract things and all abstract things are non-spatial, the quantifier in the definition should at least be restricted to non-abstract things; otherwise, presentism is inconsistent with the existence of abstract things.

The question of what it is for something to be present is the central question to be addressed in what follows. For now, I will follow Crisp’s (2004) advice and assume that the quantifier in the standard definition is unrestricted, and therefore ranges over abstracta if there are such. If we find later that, given the best candidate interpretation of the predicate ‘present’, presentism is inconsistent with the existence of abstract things, then we can revise the standard definition accordingly.

¹ I am not suggesting that anyone should or has ever held this view.
In what follows I describe a serious problem with the standard definition. The problem is that there is no obvious way of interpreting the standard definition without construing presentism as either (i) inconsistent with things that most normal self-described presentists believe, (ii) consistent with ‘eternalist’ theories such as the b-theory or the moving spotlight view, or (iii) inconsistent with the existence of things the existence of which should not be ruled out by a theory of time.\(^2\) This is a problem given the reasonable assumption that any proposed definition of presentism according to which the thesis has any of these properties is a failure. In other words, the following are plausible general constraints on any proposed definition \(D\) of presentism:

(C1) Given \(D\), presentism should not have any consequences that most normal self-described presentists would reject

(C2) Given \(D\), presentism must be inconsistent with ‘eternalist’ theories such as the b-theory and the moving spotlight view

(C3) Given \(D\), presentism must be consistent with the existence of things the existence of which should not be ruled out by a theory of time

As for C1: this constraint is a little vague, but the idea is that it would be very ungenerous to interpret the thesis of presentism in a way that makes most presentists inconsistent. For example, if (as I conjecture) most presentists hold that Socrates doesn’t exist now, then we should not define presentism in such a way that presentism entails (perhaps along with other reasonable assumptions) that Socrates exists now.

With regard to C2, it is typically assumed in the literature that ‘presentism’ and ‘eternalism’ denote inconsistent theories. For example, here is Sider (1999, 2): ‘Presentism is

\[^2\] Note that ‘exist’ and related terms are always used in the logician’s sense in what follows, according to which to exist is just to be something (or be identical to something).
the temporal analogue of the modal doctrine of actualism... The *opposite* view in the philosophy of modality is possibilism...; its temporal analogue is eternalism...’. Similarly, here is Joshua Mozersky (2011, 122): ‘Presentists are typically *opposed* by eternalists...’. Moreover, most presentists hold that presentism is inconsistent with eternalism. Thus given C1, we should recognise C2.

Again, C3 is a little vague, but the idea should be obvious: we should not expect the truth of presentism, a thesis in the metaphysics of time, to have serious ontological ramifications for other apparently separate areas of philosophy. For example, we should not expect presentism to be inconsistent with the existence of non-physical mental events, or numbers, or normative properties.

As mentioned above, in what follows I argue that there is no way of interpreting the standard definition such that it meets each of C1-C3 above. In particular, I argue that there is no reasonable interpretation *i* of the predicate ‘present’ such that, given *i*, the standard definition meets each of C1-C3 (§2). Thus the standard definition is a failure. In light of this, I suggest that presentists abandon the debate concerning whether always everything is present, and instead concentrate on defending a certain much clearer temporal-ontological thesis (which I call *currentism*) which most presentists appear to accept and most opponents of presentism (e.g. defenders of the b-theory and the growing block view) appear to reject (§3).

One final point: a distinct (although not always distinguished) debate concerning the standard definition turns on the interpretation of the universal quantifier ‘∀*.x*’. Some argue along the following lines: the universal quantifier in the standard definition must either be read as tensed or untensed. If it is read as tensed, then presentism is the obviously false thesis that always, everything is now present. If it is read as tenseless, then presentism is the trivially true thesis that always, everything is, was, or will be present. Thus presentism is
either obviously false or trivially true. (See, for example, Ludlow (2004) and Meyer (2005)).
I believe this argument fails, due to the straightforward falsehood of the third premise: if the
quantifier in the standard definition is read as ‘untensed’ (as it is intended to be), then
presentism is the neither obviously false nor trivially true thesis that always, everything is
present (formally: ∀x Present(x)). The only interesting question that remains is what it is for
something to be present.

2. The Problem with the Standard Definition

Consider once again the standard definition of presentism:

Presentism- Standard Definition: Always everything is present

Formally: A ∀x Present(x)

The question is: what exactly does it mean to say that something is ‘present’? In other words,
what is it that always everything does? In this section I describe a number of different
apparently plausible interpretations of the predicate ‘present’. In each case, I show that given
the relevant interpretation, the standard definition fails to meet one or more of C1-C3, and
therefore fails as a definition of presentism.

Here is one suggestion:

Presentness 1: It is always the case that for all x, x is present iff x is something

Formally: A ∀x (Present(x) ↔ ∃y y=x)

Given presentness 1, the standard definition comes to:

Presentism 1: Always everything is something
Formally: $A \forall x \exists y \ y = x$

This interpretation is supported by the following quote from Zimmerman (1996, my emphasis): ‘There is no advantage for the presentist in distinguishing between being present and existing; and no other obvious candidate to play the role of ‘being present’ comes readily to mind. Thus *to be present just is to be real or to exist*...’ The problem with this suggestion is that presentism 1 fails to meet constraint C2. That is, given presentism 1, presentism is consistent with ‘eternalist’ theories such as the b-theory and the moving spotlight view. The reason is obvious: presentism 1 is a trivial truth, and is therefore accepted by all reasonable theorists of time, including the b-theory and the moving spotlight view. It follows that presentism 1 cannot be the correct interpretation of the standard definition.

Here is another suggestion:

**Presentness 2:** It is always the case that for all $x$, $x$ is present iff $x$ instantiates a fundamental property of presentness

Given presentness 2, the standard definition comes to:

**Presentism 2:** Always everything instantiates a fundamental property of presentness

The problem with this suggestion is that presentism 2 fails to meet constraint C1. That is, given presentism 2, presentism has a consequence that most normal self-described presentists would reject: namely, that always, everything instantiates a fundamental property of presentness. For example, here is Dean Zimmerman (1996, n.8), a leading presentist: ‘...no real presentist has any reason to believe in a special quality of ‘being present’ (and, indeed, no articulate presentist that I know of has ever posited such a quality)...’. Zimmerman goes on to characterise ‘real presentism’ as a thesis that ‘has no room for a special quality of
‘being present’. I believe that most presentists would agree with Zimmerman here. Thus presentism 2 cannot be the correct interpretation of the standard definition.

Next, consider the following pair of suggested interpretations due to Williamson (Book MS, 27-8):

(i) First, perhaps something is present iff it has a spatial location:

**Presentness 3**: It is always the case that for all \( x \), \( x \) is present iff \( x \) has a spatial location

**Formally**: \( \forall x (\text{Present}(x) \leftrightarrow \text{Spatial Location}(x)) \)

Given presentness 3, the standard definition comes to:

**Presentism 3**: Always everything has a spatial location

**Formally**: \( \forall x (\text{Spatial Location}(x)) \)

The problem with this suggestion, as Williamson points out (although not in exactly these terms), is that presentism 3 fails to meet constraint C3. That is, given presentism 3, presentism is inconsistent with the existence of things the existence of which presentism should not rule out. In particular, if presentism is presentism 3 and abstract objects such as numbers and sets have no spatial location, then if presentism is true there are never any abstract objects. It follows that presentism 3 cannot be the correct interpretation of the standard definition.

Note that there is no point in adding a *temporally rigid* element to presentness 3, so that to be present is just to be such as to have a spatial location now (*formally*: \( \forall x \text{ N Spatial Location}(x) \)). In that case, presentism is the thesis that always, everything is now spatially located (*formally*: \( \forall x \text{ N Spatial Location}(x) \)). Given that
Socrates was something and identity is permanent, presentism entails that Socrates has a spatial location now. However, most reasonable presentists will accept the following principle (similar to Plantinga’s (1983, 11) ‘serious actualism’):

Property Principle: \( \forall x \ A \ (Fx \rightarrow \exists y \ y=x) \)

(In English: Always, everything is always such that if it has some property then it exists)

Given an acceptance of the property principle, the thesis that Socrates has a spatial location now entails that Socrates is now something, or in other words, that Socrates exists now. However, most presentists hold that Socrates no longer exists (change the example if you disagree). Thus the addition of a temporally rigid element to presentness 3 simply leads to a violation of constraint C1 by presentism 3.

(ii) Second, perhaps if something has a temporal location then it is present iff it has a spatial location:

Presentness 4: It is always the case that for all \( x \), if \( x \) has a temporal location, then \( x \) is present iff \( x \) has a spatial location

Formally: \( \forall x \ (\text{Temporal location}(x) \rightarrow (\text{Present}(x) \leftrightarrow \text{Spatial location}(x))) \)

Given presentness 4, the standard definition comes to:

Presentism 4: Always everything with a temporal location is spatially located

Formally: \( \forall x \ (\text{Temporal location}(x) \rightarrow \text{Spatial location}(x)) \)

The problem with this suggestion, as Williamson points out (although not in exactly these terms), is that presentism 4 also fails to meet constraint C3. That is, given presentism 4,
presentism is inconsistent with the existence of things the existence of which presentism should not rule out. In particular, if presentism is presentism 4 and mental events are non-physical events (and as such lack a spatial location) that occur in time (and as such have a temporal location), then if presentism is true there are never mental events. It follows that presentism 4 cannot be the correct interpretation of the standard definition.

Here is another suggestion:

**Presentness 5**: It is always the case that for all \( x \), \( x \) is present iff it is now the case that \( x \) is something

**Formally**: \( A \forall x (Present(x) \leftrightarrow N \exists y y=x) \)

Given presentness 5, the standard definition comes to:

**Presentism 5**: Always everything is now something

**Formally**: \( A \forall x N \exists y y=x \)

The problem with this suggestion is that presentism 5 fails to meet constraint C1. That is, given presentism 5, presentism has consequences that most normal self-described presentists would reject. For example, if always everything is now something, then given that Socrates was something (*formally: \( P (\exists x x=Socrates) \)) and identity is permanent, it follows that it is now the case that something is Socrates. (Note that it is left open *how Socrates is*: for example, whether he is now concrete, or merely formerly concrete). Thus if presentism is presentism 5, then presentism entails (along with the reasonable premises) that it is now the case that something is Socrates, or in other words, that Socrates exists now. However, I think it is safe to say that most presentists hold that Socrates no longer exists (change the example if you disagree!). Thus presentism 5 cannot be the correct interpretation of the standard
definition.

Of course, a defender of presentness 5 could reply to the above as follows: whilst it is true for the reason described above that presentism 5 cannot be the correct interpretation of the standard definition, it does not follow that presentness 5 is the wrong analysis of presentness. The reason is that when presentists who accept presentism 5 say that always everything is present, what they really mean is that the sentence ‘Everything is present’ is true in every context of utterance (or in other words, is a Kaplanian logical truth). Thus given presentness 5, the correct interpretation of the standard definition is:

**Presentism 5.5:** The sentence ‘Everything is now something’ (formally: ‘∀x N ∃y y= x’) expresses a true proposition in every context of utterance, or in other words is a Kaplanian logical truth

The problem with the above suggestion is that presentism 5.5 fails to meet constraint C2. That is, given presentism 5.5, presentism is consistent with ‘eternalist’ theories such as the b-theory and the moving spotlight view. For example, consider the b-theory. Ordinary b-theorists such as Sider (2001) interpret the standard temporal operators as quantifiers over times, just as modal realists such as Lewis (1986) interpret the standard modal operators ‘◊’ and ‘□’ as quantifiers over possible worlds. Furthermore, ordinary b-theorists hold that in most ordinary contexts, temporal operators tacitly restrict the individual quantifiers in their scope to the occupants of the relevant time. Thus, for example, in ordinary contexts an utterance at time $t_u$ of the simple past-tense sentence

(1) ‘There was a dinosaur’

is counted as true iff there is a time $t$ earlier than $t_u$ such that there is a dinosaur at $t$.

However, consider the central b-theoretic thesis that there are things that do not exist
at the same time. Given that what is the case is sometimes the case, the sentence ‘There are things that do not exist at the same time’ entails the sentence

(2) ‘S (There are things that do not exist at the same time)’

But if the tacit quantifier over times ‘S’ in (2) is interpreted in the normal way as restricting the explicit quantifiers in its scope to inhabitants of the time in question, then (2) is true iff there is a time $t$ such that there are things $that$ exist $at$ $t$ that do not exist at the same time. Thus in order to preserve the basic temporal-logical principle that what is the case is sometimes the case, ordinary b-theorists must interpret the explicit quantifier ‘there are’ in (2) as unrestricted. More generally, it seems that b-theorists must accept that the standard temporal operators sometimes fail to restrict the explicit quantifiers in their scope to the occupants of the time in question. If the sentence ‘Everything is now something’ is read this way, with the explicit quantifiers read as unrestricted (as intended), then it expresses relative to any context the trivially true proposition that everything is something. Thus standard b-theorists can accept that the sentence ‘Everything is now something’ is a Kaplanian logical truth. It follows that if presentism 5.5 is the correct interpretation of the standard definition, then presentism is consistent with the b-theory.

Before moving on, it is worth making a more general point about the failure of presentism 5. What the failure of presentism 5 demonstrates is that whatever the term ‘present’ is supposed to mean in the context of the statement of the thesis of presentism, it is not supposed to be temporally rigid like ‘now’. As we shall see in what follows, some presentists do not seem to grasp this point, and for that reason their own definitions of presentism fail.

For example, here is a suggestion due to Mozersky (2011, 122-5). According to Mozersky, presentism is the thesis that ‘that and only that which exists$_1$, exists$_2’$, where (as
Mozersky explains) ‘exist$_1$’ is a tensed verb that entails ‘exists now’, and ‘exist$_2$’ is similar in meaning to the existential quantifier of first-order predicate logic, in the sense that it is ‘neutral with respect to temporal context of utterance’. Now, although he does not say so explicitly, we can assume that Mozersky thinks that presentism is always true if true. Therefore, given what Mozersky says about the intended meanings of the terms ‘exist$_1$’ and ‘exist$_2$’, the thesis that that and only that which exist$_1$, exist$_2$ is equivalent to the following thesis:

**Presentism 6**: Always everything is such that it is now something iff it is something

Formally: $\forall x \ (N \exists y y=x) \leftrightarrow \exists y y=x$)

The problem with Mozersky’s suggestion should be obvious: presentism 6 fails to meet constraints C1 and C2. First, presentism 6 entails that always everything is such that if it is something, then it is something now. Given that Socrates was something (formally: $P (\exists x x=Socrates)$) and identity is permanent, it follows that it is now the case that something is Socrates. Thus if presentism is presentism 6 then presentism entails (along with some reasonable premises) that something is now Socrates, or in other words, that Socrates exists now. However, I think it is safe to say that most presentists hold that Socrates no longer exists (change the example if you disagree). Second, we saw above that ordinary b-theorists can accept that the standard temporal operators sometimes fail to restrict the explicit quantifiers in their scope to the occupants of the time in question. If presentism 6 is read in this way, with the explicit quantifiers read as unrestricted (as intended), then presentism 6 is the trivial truth that everything is something iff it is something. It follows that if presentism is presentism 6, then presentism is consistent with the b-theory.

Here is another suggestion, due to Crisp (2003, 212-15). According to Crisp ‘an object $x$ is present iff $x$ occupies or exists at the present time.’ But what is ‘the present time’,
and what is it for something to ‘occupy’ the present time? Crisp (2003, 212) explains as follows:

We shall think of the present time as follows. Say that an object $x$ is slim iff, for any $y$ and $z$, if $y$ and $z$ are parts of $x$, then there is either no temporal distance or a temporal distance of zero between $y$ and $z$. A time...is a maximal slim object: an object such that the mereological sum of it and anything which isn’t a part of it is not slim. The present time...is the maximal slim object that includes as a part every event that occurs now.

Thirdly, say that something exists at or occupies the present time iff it is a part of the present time.

Putting all of the above together yields the following interpretation of the predicate ‘present’:

**Presentness 7**: It is always the case that for all $x$, $x$ is present iff $x$ is part of a maximal slim object that includes as a part every event that is occurring now

Formally: $\forall x \ (\text{Present}(x) \leftrightarrow \exists y \ (\text{Maximally slim}(y) \land \forall z \ ((\text{Event}(z) \land \text{N Occurring}(z)) \rightarrow \text{Part}(z, y) \land \text{Part}(x, y)))$)

Given presentness 7, the standard definition comes to:

**Presentism 7**: Always everything is part of a maximal slim object that includes as a part every event that is occurring now

Formally: $\forall x \ (\exists y \ (\text{Maximally slim}(y) \land \forall z \ ((\text{Event}(z) \land \text{N Occurring}(z)) \rightarrow \text{Part}(z, y) \land \text{Part}(x, y)))$)

The problem with Crisp’s suggestion is that presentism 7 fails to meet constraint C1. That is, given presentism 7, presentism has consequences that most normal self-described presentists would reject. The reason is as follows: if it is always the case that everything is part a maximal slim object that includes as a part every event that is occurring now, then (for example) it was the case that Socrates is part of a maximal slim object that includes as a part
every event that is occurring now. Consider an event that is occurring now, such as the event of your reading this sentence. Given that the event of your reading this sentence is occurring now, it follows from presentism 7 that it was the case that Socrates is part a maximal slim object that includes as a part the event of your reading this sentence. Given Crisp’s account of what it is for an object to be maximally slim and for some $x$ to occupy some $y$ (quoted above), it follows that it was the case that there is no temporal distance or a temporal distance of zero between Socrates and the event of your reading this sentence. However, I take it that most presentists would deny that Socrates and the event of your reading this sentence were ever at temporal distance zero.

Of course, some presentists (e.g. Zimmerman (1997)) argue that certain kinds of events are always something (or as we shall put it from now on, that certain kinds of events are *permanents*). Such presentists might want to allow that the event of your reading this sentence is among the permanent events, and therefore that it was the case that Socrates and the event of your reading this sentence were at temporal distance zero. However, there is a good reason why presentists who allow that certain kinds of events are permanents should deny that the event of your reading this sentence is a permanent. The reason is that the following principle seems plausible: always, if something is the event of your reading this sentence, then you are something. (After all, if it is ever the case that you are reading this sentence, then surely you are doing something then- namely reading this sentence- and if you are ever doing something, then surely you are something then.) It follows from this plausible principle and the claim that the event of your reading this sentence is a permanent that you are a permanent. However, most presentists who hold that certain kinds of events are permanents would deny that you are a permanent. Therefore most such presentists should deny that the event of your reading this sentence is a permanent.

It remains that most presentists would (or at least, should) deny that Socrates and the
event of your reading this sentence were ever at temporal distance zero. Given that presentism 7 entails that it was the case that Socrates and the event of your reading this sentence are at temporal distance zero, presentism 7 fails to meet constraint C1. It follows that presentism 7 cannot be the correct interpretation of the standard definition of presentism.

3. A New Debate

We have described a number of different, apparently plausible interpretations of the standard definition, with a particular focus on the interpretation of the predicate ‘present’. In each case we have seen that given the relevant interpretation, the standard definition fails to meet one or more of C1-C3, and thus fails as a definition of presentism. Of course, there may be other ways of interpreting the standard definition. However, our discussion very strongly suggests that there is no plausible interpretation of the standard definition such that it meets each of C1-C3. If this is correct, then the standard definition of presentism is a failure. Let us assume that it is correct. What should presentists do? I recommend that presentists abandon the debate concerning whether always everything is present. Instead, presentists should focus on defending the much clearer temporal-ontological thesis of currentism, according to which things begin and cease to be over time. This thesis appears to be accepted by most presentists and rejected by most anti-presentists (e.g. b-theorists and moving spotlighters).

In order to fully understand currentism it is necessary to situate the thesis within a certain broader debate in the metaphysics of time. This debate concerns the correct answer to the following question:

(Q) What sort of change in what there is (i.e. what sort of ontological change) occurs over time: do things neither begin nor cease to be, begin to be only, or cease to be only, or both begin and cease to be?
It is important to note that (Q) is stated using a particular ‘a-theoretic’ notion of change over time:

*Change over time:* There is *change over time* iff there are propositions that change in truth-value *simpliciter* over time (i.e. *temporary propositions*)\(^3\)

From now on I shall operate exclusively with this sense of ‘change over time’, unless explicitly stated otherwise. I shall also assume that there is change over time in this sense iff the a-theory is true (see Dorr (Book MS, Chapter 1) for an argument to this effect).

Let us now consider each of the different possible answers to (Q):

(i) First, suppose one holds that the correct answer to (Q) is that things neither begin nor cease to be over time; or, more carefully, that nothing ever begins to be and nothing ever ceases to be. In that case, one accepts the thesis of *permanentism*:

**Permanentism:** Always everything is always something

*Formally:* \(A \forall x A \exists y y=x\)

Permanentists hold that always, everything is always something; or in other words, that always, everything always exists. Among extant theories of time, ‘eternalist’ theories such as the b-theory (defended by Sider (2001)) and the moving spotlight view (defended but not endorsed by Broad (1923)) are permanentist theories. (Can b-theorists really accept permanentism? Yes: as we saw above in §2, it seems that b-theorists must accept that the standard temporal operators sometimes fail to restrict the explicit quantifiers in their scope to the occupants of the time in question. If the statement of permanentism is read this way, with the explicit quantifiers read as unrestricted (as intended), then it is equivalent to the

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\(^3\) I do not assume any particular theory of propositions here. An example of a temporary proposition is the proposition that I am sitting: it is now true *simpliciter*, but will be false *simpliciter*.  

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trivial logical truth that that everything is something.) Of course, note that although b-
theorists and moving spotlighters agree about the correct answer to (Q), they disagree about
the correct answer to the distinct temporal-qualitative question of how much change in *how things are* occurs over time: according to ordinary b-theorists there is no change in how things are over time, whereas according to moving spotlighters there is change over time in which time instantiates the fundamental monadic property of *presentness.*

(ii) Next, suppose one holds that the correct answer to (Q) is that things begin to be only; or, more carefully, that nothing ever ceases to be but sometimes something begins to be. In that case, one would accept the thesis of *pastism*:

**Pastism:** Nothing ever ceases to be but sometimes something begins to be

Formally: $A (\neg \exists x F \rightarrow \exists y y=x) \& S (\exists x P \rightarrow \exists y y=x)$

Pastists hold that over time, things come into existence but never go out of existence. Among extant theories of time, ‘growing block’ theories such as those defended by Broad (1923), Tooley (1997) and Forrest (2004) appear to be pastist theories. Of course, note that although defenders of the ‘growing block’ view agree about the correct answer to (Q), they disagree about the correct answer to the distinct temporal-qualitative question of what sort of change in *how things are* occurs over time: according to ‘classic’ growing blockers such as Broad and Tooley very few monadic properties are lost as time passes, whereas according to Forrest very many monadic properties are both gained and lost as time passes.

(iii) Next, suppose one holds that the correct answer to (Q) is that things cease to be only; or, more carefully, that nothing ever begins to be but sometimes something ceases to be. In that case, one would accept the thesis of *futurism*:

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4 I do not mean to suggest here that according to ordinary b-theorists, there is no change over time in *any sense:* just that there is no change over time in the ‘a-theoretic’ sense defined above.
Futurism: Nothing ever begins to be but sometimes something ceases to be

Formally: \( A (\neg \exists x P \neg \exists y y=x) \& S (\exists x F \neg \exists y y=x) \)

Futurists hold that over time, things go out of existence but never come into existence. Among extant theories of time, none of which I am aware are futurist theories.

(iii) Finally, suppose that one holds that the correct answer to (Q) is that things both begin and cease to be over time; or, more carefully, that sometimes something begins to be and sometimes, something ceases to be. In that case, one would accept the thesis of currentism:

Currentism: Sometimes something begins to be and sometimes something ceases to be

Formally: \( S (\exists x P \neg \exists y y=x) \& S (\exists x F \neg \exists y y=x) \)

Currentists hold that things both come into and go out of existence over time. Among extant theories of time, presentism appears to be a currentist theory: in particular, most presentists hold that many things, including many ordinary objects such as cats, cars trees and stars, both come into and go out of existence over time. Moreover, most presentists appear to agree that the correct answer to the temporal-qualitative question of what sort of change in how things are occurs over time is that there is a great deal of change in how things over time, and that many monadic properties are gained and lost as time passes.

We have seen how the thesis of currentism fits into the important temporal-ontological debate concerning the correct answer to (Q). As mentioned above, in light of the failure of the standard definition of presentism, I recommend that presentists abandon the obscure debate concerning whether always, everything is present and instead concentrate on defending currentism. After all, as mentioned above most presentists are currentists; in
particular, they are currentists according to whom many things, including many ordinary objects, begin and cease to be over time. The goal for presentists should not be to defend the view that everything has the mysterious property of being present, but rather to provide reasons for thinking that over time many ordinary things begin and cease to exist.

In light of what we have said, some may be tempted to suggest that presentists should define presentism in terms of currentism:

**Presentism- Revised Definition**: Many things— in particular, many ordinary objects— begin and cease to exist.

Call this the revised definition. In particular, the revised definition meets each of C1-C3:

(i) First, given the revised definition presentism does not have any consequences that most normal, self-described presentists would reject (C1). As far as I am aware, no normal, self-described presentist has denied that many things, and in particular many ordinary objects, begin and cease to be over time.

(ii) Second, given the revised definition presentism is clearly inconsistent with ‘eternalist’ theories such as the b-theory and the moving spotlight view (C2), as well as the various ‘growing block’ views.

(iii) Third, given the revised definition presentism is clearly consistent with the existence of things the existence of which theories of time should not rule out, such as abstract objects and non-physical mental events (C3).

Unfortunately, there are a number of problems with this suggestion. First, as mentioned above (§1) some hold that presentism is necessarily true if true. However, it is very difficult to see how presentism could be a necessary truth if presentism is the thesis that many

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5 Thank you to Emanuel Viebahn and Timothy Williamson for helpful discussion here.
ordinary objects begin and cease to be over time. In particular, if we read the term ‘ordinary object’ as read as modally rigid, then the statement that ‘it is necessary that many ordinary objects begin and cease to be over time’ entails that actual ordinary objects- things like cats, cars, trees and stars- exist necessarily. However, most normal, self-described presentists would reject the claim that actual ordinary objects exist necessarily. On the other hand, if we read the term ‘ordinary object’ as modally non-rigid, then the statement that ‘it is necessary that many ordinary objects begin and cease to be over time’ entails that for every possible world, the objects that are ordinary relative to that world begin and cease to be over time. But why would presentists want to commit to this strange claim? A second problem with the revised definition is that it is somewhat obscure. As we saw above, currentism can be strictly defined as the thesis that sometimes, something begins to be and sometimes, something ceases to be (formally: S (\exists x P \rightarrow \exists y y=x) & S (\exists x F \rightarrow \exists y y=x)). But what exactly is meant by the statement that ‘many things- in particular, many ordinary objects- begin and cease to be over time’? For example, it is not clear whether that statement would be true if there were many things such that each of them either came into or went out of existence over time, but there were very few or none that both came into and went out of existence over time. Finally, given the revised definition it appears that presentism would be true in a possible world with the following history: at some instant \(i\) many ordinary objects come into existence, many aeons pass during which there is no ontological change at all, and then the same ordinary objects cease to be. Even given the obscurity of the standard definition, it is difficult to see why such a world should be described as one in which presentism is true. More generally, it seems right that if the term ‘presentism’ is going to be used as the name for some thesis, then that thesis should at least have something to do with presentness. The revised definition clearly fails on this count. If (as we have argued) it is impossible to say something
informative about what presentness consists in, then the term ‘presentism’ should not be used to name any thesis.

4. Conclusion

We have seen that it is very difficult to provide a satisfactory interpretation of the standard definition of presentism. In light of this, I have recommended that presentists abandon the obscure debate concerning whether presentism is true and instead concentrate on defending the clear temporal-ontological thesis of currentism, according to which things begin and cease to be over time. Only this way will genuine progress be made in the philosophy of time.
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