

ETERNAL FACTS IN AN AGEING UNIVERSE

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In recent publications, Kit Fine devises a classification of A-theories of time and defends a non-standard A-theory he calls *fragmentalism*, according to which reality as a whole is incoherent but fragments into classes of mutually coherent tensed facts. We argue that Fine's classification is not exhaustive, as it ignores another non-standard A-theory we dub *dynamic absolutism*, according to which there are tensed facts that stay numerically the same and yet undergo qualitative changes as time goes by. We expound this theory in some detail and argue that it is a serious alternative to the positions identified by Fine.

1. Introduction

According to a familiar way of characterizing the distinction between realists about tense, or A-theorists, and anti-realists about tense, or B-theorists, the former claim that there are *tensed facts*, while the latter deny this. In recent publications, Kit Fine [2005, 2006]¹ takes that characterization for granted, and exploits a version of J. M. E. McTaggart's much discussed argument against the reality of time for the purpose of establishing a classification of A-theories.² On Fine's account, realism about tense comes in three (mutually exclusive) variants: *presentism*, *relativism*, and *fragmentalism*. While both presentism and relativism find advocates in the literature, fragmentalism is a hitherto neglected view, which Fine nevertheless takes to be superior to its A-theoretic rivals.

We agree with Fine that presentism and relativism face problems. But we also think that fragmentalism has unpalatable consequences. Yet, as we will argue, Fine's classification is incomplete, as it ignores another hitherto

¹Fine [2006] is an abridged version of Fine [2005].

²See McTaggart [1927]. We should mention that although Fine invokes facts, he claims that talk about facts is ultimately to be recast in terms of statements involving his reality operator 'In reality, it is the case that', in such a way that 'The fact that *p* constitutes reality' should be understood as 'In reality, it is the case that *p*' [2005: 268; 2006: 413–4 n. 1]. In what follows, we will stick to talk about facts, and leave Fine's reductive enterprise to one side. Two points about the notion of tensed fact are worth making in order to dispel possible misunderstandings. The distinction between realism and anti-realism about tense is intended to be a distinction between two metaphysical views about what makes up reality. Accordingly, the notion of tensed fact involved in the proposed characterization of the distinction must be appropriately 'robust'. By this, we mean that (i) talk of tensed facts should be understood as talk about certain entities which enjoy objective existence, and (ii) tensed facts should not be conceived as true tensed truth-bearers, e.g. true tensed sentences or propositions. For tense realists and anti-realists alike agree that some tensed truth-bearers are true. A tensed fact must be conceived not as a truth-bearer, but rather as a 'worldly' entity which can (or perhaps even must) be invoked in order to account for the truth of certain truth-bearers.

neglected realist view which we call *dynamic absolutism*. According to this non-standard view, there are tensed facts that stay numerically the same and yet undergo qualitative changes as times goes by.

We take dynamic absolutism to be a serious alternative to the three positions identified by Fine, whose relative merits need to be thoroughly assessed. We shall reserve such an assessment for another occasion, though (see Correia and Rosenkranz [forthcoming]). Although we will propose some arguments in favour of the view, our main aim in this paper is to expound it in some detail and with precision, and convince the reader that it is indeed a serious and interesting version of tense realism.

2. Fine's McTaggartian Argument and the Resulting Classification of A-Theories

Fine's McTaggartian argument is meant to establish that the following four principles are jointly inconsistent [2005: 270–2; 2006: 399–400]:

- Realism* Reality is constituted (at least, in part) by tensed facts.
- Neutrality* No time is privileged; the tensed facts that constitute reality are not oriented towards one time as opposed to another.
- Absolutism* The constitution of reality is an absolute matter, i.e. not relative to a time or other form of temporal standpoint.
- Coherence* Reality is not contradictory; it is not constituted by facts with incompatible content.

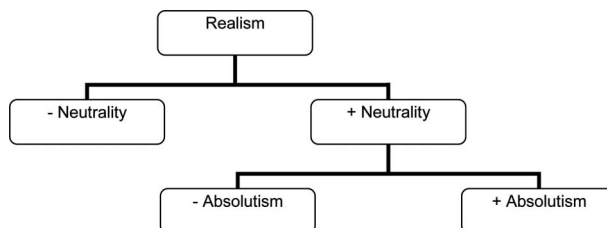
Fine's argument for this inconsistency runs as follows [2006: 400; see also 2005: 272]:

It follows from Realism that reality is constituted by some tensed fact. There will therefore be some time *t* at which this fact obtains. Now Neutrality states that reality is not oriented towards one time as opposed to another. So reality will presumably be constituted by similar sorts of tensed facts that obtain at other times. But this means, as long as temporal reality is sufficiently variegated, that some of these facts will have incompatible contents. If reality is constituted by the present fact that I am sitting, for example, then it may well be constituted by the subsequent fact that I am standing. By Absolutism, reality is absolutely constituted by such facts; and this is then contrary to Coherence (and the underlying assumption of Absolutism).

Granted that the argument succeeds, a realist about tense—that is, a friend of Realism—must reject at least one of the three remaining principles.³ Fine

³Strictly speaking, this is not true: a friend of Realism could accept all three principles and deny that temporal reality is 'sufficiently variegated'. But we shall assume as given the (plausible) principle that if Neutrality holds, then temporal reality is 'sufficiently variegated' so that, to use Fine's example, it is

calls those realists who reject Neutrality *presentists* (the privileged time is intended to be the present time), and those who accept it *non-standard realists*. And he calls those non-standard realists who reject Absolutism *relativists*, and those who accept Absolutism but reject Coherence *fragmentalists*. The resulting classification can be depicted as follows:



Fine [2006] argues that the non-standard forms of realism are superior to presentism; Fine [2005] argues for the same conclusion, and in addition seeks to establish that fragmentalism is superior to relativism.

But does the argument succeed? One difficulty in answering this question is that it is far from obvious how the four principles are to be understood. One reason is that they involve non-orthodox talk of facts ‘constituting reality’. On our preferred view, the notion of constituting reality should simply be identified with the notion of existing (as applied to facts). We will throughout have this understanding of the notion in mind, but will nevertheless keep on using Fine’s idiom.⁴

On this understanding of constitution, what Realism states is clear. We take Neutrality to state that there is more than one time at which reality is constituted by tensed facts, and Absolutism to state that constituting reality is not a temporary property of tensed facts: if it is correct to say that a given fact constitutes reality at a time, it will be likewise correct to say that it constitutes reality at any other time. Coherence, in contrast, remains fairly unclear as formulated, and it is only by looking at various parts of Fine’s papers that one gets a grip on what the principle says.

In the next section we present an objection to Fine’s argument which involves an interpretation of Coherence which, we think, is the right one.

3. The Missing Premise

Let us assume Absolutism, and let us grant that reality is ‘sufficiently variegated’, so that—to use Fine’s own example—reality is constituted by the present fact that KF is sitting and by the subsequent fact that KF is

constituted by the present fact that KF is sitting and by the subsequent fact that KF is standing. In §3 we explain how we understand Fine’s example, and hence what ‘variegation’ means in this context.

⁴Just as Fine wants to distinguish between what is the case and what, *in reality*, is the case (see note 2 above), he wants to distinguish between what exists and what *really* exists—or, as he prefers to say, between what exists and what is *real* (see Fine [2010]). Here we do not want to take sides for or against this latter distinction. Should it be accepted, the concept of existence we are working with would have to be understood as the concept of *real* existence.

standing. We take this latter assumption to be equivalent to the assumption that the following two sentences are true:

- (a) At the present time, reality is constituted by the fact that KF is sitting—call that fact ‘ β ’;
- (b) At some future time τ , reality is constituted by the fact that KF is standing—call that fact ‘ γ ’.

Taken together, (a) and (b) imply Neutrality. By Absolutism, the temporal locutions ‘At the present time’ in (a) and ‘At some future time τ ’ in (b) do not operate on the subsequent predications of constitution: ‘at time—, ... constitutes reality’ is equivalent to ‘... constitutes reality (*simpliciter*)’. Therefore, we must say that both β and γ constitute reality (*simpliciter*). Fine concludes that Coherence is violated. But is it?

Importantly, the notion of incoherence or contradictoriness Fine has in mind is not the one that one would naturally expect: he is adamant that fragmentalism does not entail that there are true contradictions [2005: 282; 2006: 402]. It emerges from Fine’s papers, in particular from his discussion of fragmentalism, that the relevant notion of incoherence can be characterized as follows:

For reality to be incoherent is for there to be two tensed facts f and g such that for some p and q such that it is impossible that at some time, both p and q , (i) at some time, both f and g constitute reality, and (ii) at some time, f is the fact that p , and g is the fact that q .⁵

On that account, in order to conclude from Absolutism, (a) and (b) that reality is incoherent in the relevant sense, we should first be able to infer the following:

- (c) At some time, β is the fact that KF is sitting and γ is the fact that KF is standing.

Yet, (c) cannot be inferred from Absolutism, (a) and (b) alone. It is our view that Fine’s argument involves a tacit transition from Absolutism, (a) and (b) to (c). This move is licensed by the following metaphysical principle governing the diachronic identity of tensed facts:⁶

Fixed-Content: If at time t , tensed fact f both constitutes reality and is the fact that p , then for every time u , if f constitutes reality at u , then at u , f is the fact that p .

⁵The quantified expression ‘for some p and q ’ binds variables which occupy sentential positions. Depending on which semantics for quantification into sentential position is adopted, this characterization of incoherence may require an appeal to an idealized language with sufficient expressive power.

⁶Here and below, principles with free variables should be understood as closed by means of the relevant universal quantifiers.

By Absolutism, γ constitutes reality at both the present time and τ , and so by (b) and Fixed-Content, at the present time, γ is the fact that KF is standing. Using (a), we can then infer (c).

We contend that Fine implicitly makes use of Fixed-Content. As we shall argue in §5 there is a plausible alternative to Fixed-Content, and once this alternative is accepted, Fine's argument for the joint inconsistency of Realism, Neutrality, Absolutism and Coherence is blocked.

4. Versions of Tense Realism Under Fixed-Content

According to our diagnosis, Fine's classification of tense-realist views is correct only if Fixed-Content is taken for granted. There are reasons to be unhappy with any of these versions of tense realism. This is not the place to argue against them at any length, but let us at least point out what we take to be some important problems for these views.

According to presentism, reality does not extend beyond the present: it is like a point event without duration. Presentism is subject to the charge that it is indistinguishable from the Russellian view that the universe has just popped into existence, replete with traces of an apparent past and future tendencies. On that view, the present truth of our past- and future-tensed statements is strangely dissociated from any past or future portions of reality they are so naturally taken to describe. In addition, it is hard to see how the view could accommodate change and, as Fine himself argues [2005: 286–8; 2006: 404–6], the passage of time.

It is natural to think of temporal reality as being 'one' and not 'many', and the contravening conception that views it as a mere collection of different successive realities tends to strike one as implausible. Just as there is not one reality where you are and another one where we are, there does not seem to be a succession of distinct realities corresponding to different times, including, say, pre-war reality and post-war reality. Talking this way may be a vivid means of conveying sociocultural, political or economical differences between epochs. But when it comes to metaphysics, one tends to see these different epochs as parts of a single reality. Relativism simply denies that temporal reality is 'one' in the relevant metaphysical sense.

Fine distinguishes between temporal reality's being 'one' and its being 'of a piece' [2005: 262; 2006: 413]. According to fragmentalism, while reality is indeed 'one'—the constitution of reality is absolute, so that there are no diachronic shifts in what facts constitute it—, it is not 'of a piece', in so far as it fragments into mutually incoherent classes of mutually coherent facts. The fragmentalist identifies times with maximally coherent fragments [2005: 281].

One reason to be unhappy with fragmentalism is that it is incompatible with a principle which has a great pre-theoretical plausibility, namely:

Truth: If at a given time t , f constitutes reality and is the fact that p , then it is true at t that p .

The incompatibility is easy to establish. Consider again our two facts β and γ . Given Absolutism, both constitute reality at any time, and by Fixed-Content, at all times β is the fact that KF is sitting and γ the fact that KF is standing. By Truth, it follows that at all times, (it is true that) KF is both sitting and standing—which is impossible.

The fragmentalist may feel unmoved by this objection. For he endorses an alternative to Truth, namely,

*Truth**: If f is the fact that p and f belongs to time t ,⁷ then it is true at t that p ,

and he may insist that the intuitive connection between facts and truth which Truth is intended to express is perfectly captured by Truth*. Yet, Truth* lacks the pre-theoretical plausibility of Truth, and *ceteris paribus* a view which incorporates Truth should be preferred to a view which does not, *a fortiori* to a view which incorporates Truth* instead of Truth.

Truth is a consequence of another principle which also has great pre-theoretical plausibility, namely:

Exp: If at a given time t , f both constitutes reality and is the fact that p , then it is true at t that p , and the latter is the case because at t , f constitutes reality and is the fact that p .

Since fragmentalists must reject Truth, they cannot avail themselves of Exp, and this should be counted against them. Also, it is not clear that there is an alternative principle they can endorse. Reflecting on Truth*, one might think of the following suggestion:

*Exp**: If f is the fact that p and f belongs to time t , then it is true at t that p , and the latter is the case because f is the fact that p and f belongs to t .

Yet, Exp* appears to lack any pre-theoretical plausibility, if only because the notion of a fragment it relies on is theory-laden.

A further objection to fragmentalism, which is perhaps more compelling, concerns the very notion of coherence—call it ‘coherence*’—at work in the definition of a fragment. The notion of coherence* cannot be the one at work in the principle of Coherence. For supposing, say, that there is no time, past, present or future, at which Socrates is furious and Plato is anxious, the fragmentalist should say that there is no fragment which comprises both the fact that Socrates is furious and the fact that Plato is anxious, and accordingly that these two facts do not cohere*; and yet, these two facts cohere, in so far as it could have been the case that, at some time, Socrates is furious and Plato is anxious. Coherence* entails coherence, but the converse does not hold.

It is natural to think of coherence*, and so fragment-membership, as reducible to coexistence, i.e. to hold that for some given facts to cohere is for them to constitute reality at the same time. Yet of course, given his commitment to Absolutism the fragmentalist cannot endorse that account,

⁷Remember that the fragmentalist identifies times with maximally coherent fragments.

on pains of being committed to the view that every fact coheres* with every other fact, and hence that there is only one fragment—a view which, combined with the identification of times with fragments, is incompatible with Neutrality. Now if the proposed account of coherence* fails, it is hard to see how the notion should be understood. Fine appears to take the notion as a primitive [2005: 281]. But on our view, the notion is *prima facie* too mysterious to be taken as primitive.

5. Shifty-Content and Dynamic Absolutism

Fixed-Content is a principle about the diachronic identity of tensed facts. To our knowledge, the question to which this principle answers has hardly ever been raised, and accordingly the principle has hardly ever been explicitly formulated. We argued that Fine's McTaggartian argument makes implicit use of this principle, and it is our impression that it is indeed tacitly accepted by many tense realists.

But whether Fixed-Content holds or not is not at all a trivial matter. There is nothing in the notion of a tensed fact that would force this principle upon us. There is indeed another principle which, on our view, is *prima facie* a plausible alternative.

Let us think again about fact γ . We know that at time τ , γ constitutes reality and is the fact that KF is standing. Assuming that γ constitutes reality at the present time, Fixed-Content implies that γ is also presently the fact that KF is standing. Granted that, say, τ is exactly one day hence, on the alternative view we have in mind, γ is not now the fact that KF is standing. It is rather the fact that *one day hence*, KF is standing.

For a general formulation of the alternative view, it will be convenient to introduce some notation. We shall use ' t is n days from u '

for ' $t = u$ ' in case $n = 0$,

for ' t is $(-n)$ days before u ' in case $n < 0$, and

for ' t is n days after u ' in case $n > 0$.

And likewise, we shall use ' n days from the present'

for 'presently' in case $n = 0$,

for ' $(-n)$ days ago' in case $n < 0$, and

for ' n days hence' in case $n > 0$.⁸

⁸Which numbers (e.g. the integers, the rationals or the reals) one allows to provide possible references for ' n ' depends on one's take on the granularity of time. The use of metric tense-logical operators, as made familiar by Arthur Prior [1957: ch. II; 1967: ch. VI], will prove crucial to the exposition of our view, in particular in the reduction of times that we propose. Prior himself never used metric operators to this end. His tense-logical reductions of times to world-states made use of the standard, non-metric tense-logical operators instead [1967: ch. V].

The alternative to Fixed-Content can now be formulated as follows:

Shifty-Content: If at time t , tensed fact f both constitutes reality and is the fact that p , then for every time u , if u is n days from t and f constitutes reality at u , then at u , f is the fact that $(-n)$ days from the present, p .

Shifty-Content implies that the tensed facts which constitute reality at more than one time, if any, qualitatively change through time. In contrast, Fixed-Content implies that tensed facts never change qualitatively, even those, if any, which constitute reality at several times.

We assume that statements of the type ‘The fact that n days from the present, $p =$ the fact that m days from the present, p ’, where ‘ n ’ and ‘ m ’ refer to distinct numbers, are always false. Once this assumption is in place, it is clear that, by endorsing Shifty-Content instead of Fixed-Content, one can block Fine’s McTaggartian argument. For, assuming Absolutism, by Shifty-Content, at the present time, β is the fact that KF is sitting and γ is the fact that one day hence, KF is standing, and at τ , β is the fact that one day ago, KF is sitting and γ is the fact that KF is standing. By the assumption we just made, at the present time, β is *not* also the fact that one day hence, KF is sitting, and at τ , γ is *not* also the fact that one day ago, KF is standing. More generally, thanks to Shifty-Content and that assumption, there is no time and no number n such that, at that time, β is the fact that n days from the present, KF is sitting, and γ is the fact that n days from the present, KF is standing.

If the foregoing is correct, then the combination of Neutrality and Absolutism comes in two variants: fragmentalism, which accepts Fixed-Content, and the position we call ‘dynamic absolutism’, which instead accepts Shifty-Content. Fragmentalism, which for obvious reasons may correspondingly be dubbed ‘static absolutism’, excludes Coherence, and is incompatible with Truth, and so with Exp. In contrast, dynamic absolutism is compatible with Exp, and so with Truth, and it can easily be shown that the combination of dynamic absolutism and Truth entails Coherence. Thus, dynamic absolutism escapes two of the three objections we raised against fragmentalism. It also escapes the third objection, since it does not invoke a mysterious primitive notion of coherence*. And finally, of course, it is immune from the objections raised against presentism and relativism, since it incorporates both Neutrality and Absolutism.

6. A Version of Dynamic Absolutism

There are various theories which fall under the label ‘dynamic absolutism’, in particular theories which differ on what they take the tensed facts to be. In this section we present one such theory, which we take to be particularly attractive (see also Correia and Rosenkranz [forthcoming]).

We call the tensed facts posited by that theory ‘A-facts’. An A-fact is composed of one, monadic or polyadic, tensed property—the *predicable* of

the fact, and of one or more objects whose number is that of the adicity of the property—the *subject(s)* of the fact. In case an A-fact is composed of several subjects, they compose it in a given order.

The tensed property which is the predicable of an A-fact has an associated *proto-property* and a *tense-aspect* which constantly varies with time and which we also derivatively attribute to all A-facts of which that tensed property is the predicable. Proto-properties have no tense-aspect and should not be confused with the tensed properties they are associated with.

To illustrate, assume that one day ago, John was sad, and that at the present time, reality is constituted by the A-fact that one day ago John was sad. Then that fact is composed of John and the tensed property of being sad one day ago. The proto-property of this tensed property is the proto-property of being sad, and the tense-aspect of this tensed property is one-day-pastness.

We should emphasize here that we use reference to, and quantification over, tense-aspects merely for the sake of convenience. Statements of the type ‘Predicable Φ has the tense-aspect of *n*-days-from-the-present-ness’ must ultimately be understood as saying that, for some proto-property φ , Φ is the tensed property of being φ *n* days from the present. Correspondingly, quantification over tense-aspects is ultimately to be understood as involving only quantification over numbers and proto-properties.

The components of an A-fact never numerically change. Likewise, predicables always retain their constituent proto-property. Predicables and A-facts are subject to the following identity conditions:

Two predicables are identical iff they share their associated proto-property and sometimes have the same tense-aspect.

Two A-facts are identical iff they have the same subject, or subjects in the same order, and the same predicable.

Owing to the constant variation of their tense-aspect, both predicables and A-facts constantly qualitatively change through time. These changes obey the following laws:

All predicables (A-facts) sometimes have the tense-aspect of presentness.

For every predicable Φ (A-fact f) and for all n and m , if n days from the present, Φ (f) has the tense-aspect of presentness, then m days from the present, Φ (f) has the tense-aspect of $(n-m)$ -days-from-the-present-ness,

where the operator ‘ k days from the present’ is understood as before, and correspondingly, ‘ k -days-from-the-present-ness’ is short for ‘presentness’ if $k = 0$, for ‘ k -days-futurity’ if $k > 0$, and for ‘ $(-k)$ -days-pastness’ if $k < 0$. (Recall that the predicables are tensed properties and should not be confused with their associated proto-properties, which latter are not subject to qualitative change over time.)

Consider again the property Φ of being sad one day ago and the fact f that one day ago John was sad. They both presently have the tense-aspect of one-

day-pastness. One day ago, they both had the tense-aspect of presentness: Φ was the property of being presently sad and f was the fact that presently John is sad. One day hence, they will both have the tense-aspect of two-days-pastness: Φ will be the property of being sad two days ago and f will be the fact that two days ago John was sad. And so on. The principle of change for A-facts thus ensures that A-facts satisfy Shifty-Content.

The proposed ontology of A-facts allows one to reduce times to classes of A-facts. Say that two A-facts are *contemporaneous* just in case they have the same tense-aspect. Thanks to the above principle of change for A-facts, contemporaneousness is rigid: if two facts are ever contemporaneous, they always are. Contemporaneousness is an equivalence relation, and we identify the times with the corresponding equivalence classes. Let the *index* of equivalence class c be the number n such that all members of c have the tense-aspect of n -days-from-the-present-ness. Given that the tense-aspect of A-facts constantly varies with time, the index of an equivalence class likewise constantly changes. Yet, again thanks to the above principle of change for A-facts, the difference between the indices of any two classes never changes. For every positive n , say that class c *precedes* class c' by n days just in case $n =$ the index of c' minus the index of c . By what has just been said, if it is ever the case that a given class precedes another by n days, this is always so. We identify the relation of being n days before, as applied to times, with the relation of preceding by n days, holding of equivalence classes. This completes our reduction.⁹

The picture which emerges is accordingly this: although reality is always constituted by the same A-facts, these facts undergo qualitative changes. In other words, the A-facts are eternal but not immutable: they age as the universe they constitute ages. This is what, on the proposed view, the passage of time ultimately consists in.

7. Averting Hostile Takeover

Some might think that talk about tensed properties that change their tense-aspect is just concealed talk about tenseless properties that merely Cambridge-change in the tensed ways we refer to them. After all, just like tenseless properties, the allegedly tensed properties mentioned so far can never be lost.

There comes a point, in metaphysics anyway, where one is forced to dig one's heels in. Once we are at the level of theory and one's theory aspires to yield the ultimate explanation of why things are the way they are, one can do little more than simply reject any attempt to recast that theory in allegedly more fundamental terms. Indeed, if such an attempt proves successful at all, it would always seem possible to turn the tables and reinterpret

⁹Fine [2005: 308–10] argues against relativism, and so indirectly in favour of fragmentalism, on the grounds that it must take times to be among the basic constituents of reality. Given the availability of a reduction of times to classes of A-facts in the proposed version of dynamic absolutism, the latter view escapes any objection of that sort.

that reinterpretation in one's favoured terms, arriving at the original formulation.¹⁰ Yet, that either theory is just a notational variant of the other, with all metaphysical substance being lost, is rejected by realists and anti-realists alike.

The problem proves even more intractable in the present case. Realists and anti-realists about tense alike take tensed vocabulary to be a perfectly respectable means to describe temporal reality. They disagree only about whether its tensedness reflects an objective feature of that reality. Evidently, then, the mere use of this vocabulary in an attempt to give a true description of temporal reality will be insufficient to disclose whether one is a realist or an anti-realist about tense. The best one can do, it therefore seems, is to single out a privileged context in which this vocabulary might be used and to hold that if descriptions effected by its use in this context are true, then tense is an objective feature of temporal reality. Plausibly, the context in question is that of metaphysical theory. Thus, in the end, we might have to agree with Fine [2005; 2006] that, lest we engage in mere table-thumping, we need something like a primitive Reality-operator (with a capital 'R') in order to successfully express metaphysical disagreements. Metametaphysical doubts may, however, remain. But this is not the place to take on that sceptical challenge.

Even so, one might still hope to avert the envisaged hostile takeover. The trick is to find a principle, validated by the view proposed, which quantifies over a property such that one cannot endorse the principle while understanding the quantifier to range exclusively over tenseless properties. For the time being assume that it is a necessary, albeit insufficient, condition for a property to be tenseless that it cannot be lost and so, conversely, a sufficient condition for a property to be tensed that it can be lost. Although the tensed properties composing our A-facts cannot be lost by their subjects, there are higher-level properties of times that can be.

Recall our reduction of times to equivalence classes for contemporaneousness and the definition of the index of such a class. Clearly, a time's being present corresponds, *via* the reduction, to the corresponding class's having index zero. Now there is nothing to stop us from postulating the existence of a *property* of being present, which we define as follows:

Pres: The property of being present =_{df} the property such that always, for all x , x has it iff x has index zero.

Once this is done, our metaphysics validates the following principle:

(#) The property of being present is such that π presently has it, and sometimes does not have it,

where ' π ' names the present time. For by *Pres*, always, time t has the property of being present iff t has index zero, and while π presently has index zero, it will fail to have it in the future and failed to have it in the past.

¹⁰This is all the more pertinent in the present case since, as McTaggart [1927: §610] clearly saw, tenseless statements can be reduced to tensed statements, be they part of the object language or the language of theory.

By contrast, provided that tenseless properties cannot be lost, then on any view that regards all properties as tenseless, (#) will fail, irrespective of which property ‘the property of being present’ may be taken to denote, while any property defined by Pres would have to be one that validates (#). So it would seem that once the proposed theory includes (#), that theory can no longer be reinterpreted exclusively in terms of quantification over tenseless properties. So, if a property can be lost only if tensed, B-theorists must deny that (#) is presently true. B-theorists are likely to identify the semantic value of ‘the property of being present’ at π with the property of being identical with π , and trivially, π can never fail to have this property.

It might, however, now be feared that once we admit the existence of a property that can be lost, we are bound to reject the absoluteness of constitution after all. For, supposing that a given object x presently has a property F and will fail to have that property one day hence, it would seem that the fact that x has F will presently constitute reality and fail to do so one day hence. In particular, then, if π presently has the property of being present but no longer has that property one day hence, it would seem that there is a fact, viz. the fact that π has that property, which does not constitute reality absolutely.

In response to this worry we simply deny that the description ‘the fact that π has the property of being present’ refers. This, of course, does not amount to denying that there is an explanation of why the statement ‘ π has the property of being present’ is presently true: the statement is presently true because π presently has index zero, i.e. because presently, for all A-facts $f \in \pi$, there is a proto-property φ such that being- φ -0-days-from-the-present is the predicable of f .

The proposed explanation of the present truth of the statement does not obviously invoke truth-makers. It is in principle open to us to hold, consistently with the absoluteness of constitution, that there is a fact which makes the statement presently true, namely the fact that for all A-facts $f \in \pi$, there is a proto-property φ such that being- φ -0-days-from-the-present is the predicable of f . There is indeed no problem in taking this universal fact to constitute reality absolutely. For provided that we are at all ready to countenance such a universal fact, we can hold, in line with the spirit of our metaphysics of tensed properties and facts, that for all n , n days from the present, the said fact is the fact that for all A-facts $f \in \pi$, there is a proto-property φ such that being- φ -($-n$)-days-from-the-present is the predicable of f .

Once such universal facts have been postulated, one might after all be driven to concede that the fact-description ‘the fact that π has the property of being present’ presently refers to a fact of that kind that makes ‘ π has the property of being present’ presently true. Note, however, that this will have the odd consequence that the property referred to in the context of that fact-description is not the predicable of the fact denoted by that fact-description. It is for this reason that we prefer to treat the fact-description ‘the fact that π has the property of being present’ as empty, even if we leave it open whether ‘the fact that π has index zero’ presently refers to a universal fact.

Are we home and dry? It seems not. The position known as ‘adverbialism’ in the debate about the problem of temporary intrinsics suggests that anti-realists about tense can avail themselves of properties that can be lost. According to this suggestion, being a property that can be lost is not sufficient for a property’s being tensed, contrary to what we assumed.

Adverbialists (e.g. Johnston [1987], Lowe [1988]) hold that in a temporally qualified statement such as ‘The candle has the property of being straight at t ’, the qualifier ‘at t ’ is an adverb which modifies the copula ‘has’, and accordingly that such a statement expresses that the corresponding object exemplifies the corresponding property in a certain way—in our example, that the candle exemplifies the property of being straight ‘ t -ly’. It would seem that adverbialists can account for the loss of properties without being committed to the view that these properties are tensed. For, if the candle has the property of being straight at time t and fails to have it at a subsequent time u , this is now taken to consist in the candle’s exemplifying the property of being straight t -ly but not u -ly, and there seems to be no pressure to take that property to be tensed.

It would thus seem that as long as anti-realists understand statements of type ‘ π has the property of being present at t ’ in the adverbialist way, they can after all accept (#) without thereby being committed to the existence of tensed properties. By the same token, however, if adverbialism can independently be faulted, (#) may after all prove sufficient to avert the anti-realists’ hostile take-over.

Despite these difficulties we insist that the view here proposed is a version of realism about tense (try to prove us wrong!) and that, however controversial it may be, the mere availability of this view shows that one is not, as a realist about tense, forced to choose between presentism, relativism and fragmentalism.¹¹

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