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Temporal Nothingism

1. INTRODUCTION

*Nothingism about S*: (i) S is true; and (ii) there’s nothing about reality that makes it true; indeed, there’s nothing about *any existing object* (or property or event or whatever) that plays *any role* in making S true.

*My Thesis*: (a) Presentists can (plausibly and intuitively) solve the truthmaking problem with their view by endorsing certain kinds of nothingist views; and (b) the unrestricted truthmaking principles that are incompatible with these nothingist views are false.

2. PRESENTISM AND TRUTHMAKING

*Presentism*: Only present objects exist. (Or: Physical reality is 3D.)

*Eternalism*: Past, present, and future objects all exist. (Or: Physical reality is 4D.)

*The unrestricted truthmaking principle*: For any sentence S, if S is true, then there’s something about the world, or about reality, that makes S true. (Note that this is weaker than the truthmak*er* principle.)

[Used-to-be-Dino] There used to be dinosaurs.

[Was-Dino] WAS(There are dinosaurs)—where ‘WAS’ is a primitive sentential past-tense operator.

[T1] Sentence S is true.

[T2] If presentism is true, then there’s nothing about reality that makes S true.

[T3] If S is true, then there’s something about reality that makes it true (this, of course, follows from the unrestricted truthmaking principle). Therefore,

[T4] Presentism is not true.

*Error-theoretic* *response*: reject [T1].

*Find-the-truthmaker* *response*: reject [T2].

*Nothingist* *response*: reject [T3].

Presentists can endorse different responses to different versions of the argument. Consider, e.g.,

[W] Prince William is a direct descendant of William the Conqueror.

But presentists can’t plausibly give error-theoretic responses to *all* instances of the truthmaking argument against their view. For then they’d have to say that *everything* we say about the past is false. Also, I don’t think presentists can find truthmakers for all the sentences about the past that they’re committed to. If that’s right, then nothingism is the presentists only hope...

3. HOW NOTHINGIST VIEWS COULD BE TRUE

(AND HOW THE UNRESTRICTED TRUTHMAKING PRINCIPLE COULD BE FALSE)

*The unrestricted truthmaking principle*: For any sentence S, if S is true, then there’s something about reality that makes S true.

*The restricted truthmaking principle*: For any sentence S *that’s about reality* (or about how things *are*, or what *is*), if S is true, then there’s something about reality that makes S true.

*View #1*: (a) It *is* possible to make a claim (of some kind or other) without making a claim *about reality*, or about how things *are*; and (b) claims of this kind *can* be true; and (c) since claims of this kind aren’t *about* reality, we shouldn’t think that they would need to be made true by reality in order to be true; and so (d) we should think that a claim of this kind could be true, even if there were nothing about reality that made it true; and so (e) we should reject the unrestricted truthmaking principle in favor of the restricted truthmaking principle.

*View #2*: Presentism is true, and sentences like [Was-Dino] and [Used-to-be-Dino] are not about reality at all. In other words, they don’t make claims about how things *are*, or about what *is*. Rather, they make claims about how things *were,* or *used to be*. Or more precisely, to avoid saying that these sentences make claims about how some *existing things* used to be, we can say that these sentences make *pure* *was-claims*, or *pure used-to-be claims*, rather than *things-are-thus-and-so claims*.

*I’ll argue*: (a) we should reject the unrestricted truthmaking principle for reasons like this; and (b) we can plausibly solve the truthmaking problem with presentism by endorsing nothingist views.

*Remarks about aboutness*: What is [Was-Dino] *about*, according to nothingists about that sentence? Well, if ‘about’ is a 2-place predicate—if it expresses a relation between a sentence and a bit of reality—then [Was-Dino] is *not about anything*. But if ‘about’ just informally picks out a subject matter, then, speaking loosely, we can say that [Was-Dino] is “about how things *used to be*, rather than about how things *are*.”

4. FIVE POINTS TO NOTE ABOUT NOTHINGIST VIEWS

1. Presentists should endorse nothingist views only of sentences that are *purely* about the past—i.e., sentence that don’t have any entailments about the present or future. (Or, if presentists reject open-futurism, then they should endorse nothingism only about sentences that are *purely about the past and/or future*—i.e., sentences that have no entailments about the present.) Either way, presentists should *not* endorse nothingism about sentences like ‘Kamala Harris is human, and she used to be a senator.’

2. What presentists actually need to argue for (in order to motivate a nothingist-style response to the truthmaking argument against presentism that’s based on the sentence S) is the following thesis:

*Conditional Nothingism About S*: Even if presentism were true, and even if there were nothing about reality that made S true, that sentence would still *be* true—and so nothingism about S would also be true.

3. Analogous points can be made about **grounding**. So nothingists should say that there’s no such thing—out there in the world, so to speak—as *the fact that there used to be dinosaurs*.

4. Nothingism about S does not entail that S is *brute*. For we can explain truths about the past by appealing to *other* truths about the past. And we can then claim that there’s nothing about the world that makes any of the sentences in these explanations true.

5. Nothingists about [Was-Dino] can and should endorse the following sentence:

[Because] ‘There used to be dinosaurs’ is true because there used to be dinosaurs.

But they should say that (a) the word ‘because’ is being used here to express a two-place sentential operator, not a relation between facts, and (b) the right-hand side of [Because]—the part that comes after the word ‘because’—doesn’t make a claim about reality.

5. NOTHINGISM ABOUT PRESENTISH SENTENCES

**5.1 The Presentoids:** (i) The Presentoids are committed presentists. And (ii) they want to make claims about how things *used to be*, or how things *were*. So (iii) they introduce a primitive sentential past-tense operator (‘WAS’), and they stipulate that in their language—*Presentish*—sentences of the form ‘WAS(P)’ don’t say *anything* about the nature of reality, or about how things *are*. They make claims only about how things *were*—or, more precisely, they make *pure WAS-claims*. E.g., the Presentoids univocally claim that, in *their* language, [Was-Dino] doesn’t say *anything* about the nature of reality, or about how things *are*; it says something only about how things *used to be*; i.e., in Presentish, [Was-Dino] is a *pure WAS-claim*—i.e., it doesn’t have any entailments about how reality *is*.

You might think that [Was-Dino] at least says that the world has the property *being such that there used to be dinosaurs*. But the Presentoids ensure us that, in *their* language, [Was-Dino] just *doesn’t* say that the world has that property. (Some Presentoids *believe* that the world has that property, but they all agree that, in Presentish, [Was-Dino] doesn’t *say* this.)

**5.2 The Mere *Possibility* of Presentish:** You might think that the Presentoids just *can’t* do what they’re trying to do with [Was-Dino]; for you might think it’s just *impossible* to make a claim about how things were—or to make a ‘WAS’-claim—without making any claim at all about how things *are*, or about the nature of reality. But we have good reason to think that this *is* possible: (i) We seem to be able to conceive of the Presentoids doing this; and we don’t seem to be led into contradiction by the idea of someone making a ‘WAS’-claim without saying anything about the nature of reality; and we don’t seem to have any positive reason to think that this isn’t genuinely possible; and, together, these three points give us at least a defeasible *prima facie* reason to think this *is* possible. And (ii) if you deny that this is possible, then you’ll have to say that when the Presentoids utter [Was-Dino], they *haven’t said anything*; but that seems really implausible—it seems that they *have* said something.

**5.3 The Main Argument:** I need to argue for the following instance of Conditional Nothingism About S:

*Conditional Nothingism About [Was-Dino]*: Even if presentism were true, and even if there were nothing about reality that made the Presentish sentence [Was-Dino] true, that sentences would still *be* true—and so nothingism about the Presentish sentence [Was-Dino] would also be true.

GOD: Presentism is true, and there’s nothing about reality that makes [Was-Dino] true.

DWIGHT: OK, then [Was-Dino] *isn’t* true—because there’s nothing about reality that makes it true.

ME: You’re being really *weird*. And *draconian*. The Presentoids are getting things *right*. They’re saying that there used to be dinosaurs, and there *did* used to be dinosaurs. Do you want to *deny* that? Do you want to say that it’s *not* the case that there used to be dinosaurs?

1. *Presentist Scenario*: (a) Presentism is true; (b) there’s nothing about reality that makes the Presentish sentence [Was-Dino] true; and (c) everything else remains unchanged. *Question*: Does the ordinary notion of *truth* apply to the Presentish sentence [Was-Dino] in the Presentist Scenario? *Our Intuition*: *Yes!*

Dwight assumes that for a sentence to be true, reality has to *make* it true; but if we just evaluate the Presentish sentence [Was-Dino] in a normal way—using ordinary standards of evaluation—it seems that this is in fact *not required*. If we evaluate [Was-Dino] using ordinary standards, we get the result that it’s *true*. It’s true because (a) it says that there used to be dinosaurs, and (b) there *did* used to be dinosaurs.

2. If you deny what I’m saying, then if you find yourself in the Presentist Scenario, you’ll have to say that it’s *not the case* that there used to be dinosaurs—and that the holocaust never happened; but these claims seem wildly implausible (and they would seem so even if we were in the Presentist Scenario).

*Upshot*: The ordinary notion of truth is broader than the Draconian notion that requires truthmaking.

**5.4 Eternalish:** The Presentoids are happy to admit that other people can speak different languages. E.g., in *Eternalish*, [Was-Dino] says that dinosaurs exist in a past region of spacetime.

**5.5 Presentists:** Real-life presentists can stipulate that their ‘WAS’ is synonymous with Presentish ‘WAS’; and so my argument motivates nothingism about the ‘WAS’-sentences of real-life presentists.

**5.6 Five Conclusions:** (i) Conditional Nothingism About [Was-Dino] is true. (ii) The truthmaking argument against presentism that’s based on [Was-Dino] doesn’t work. (iii) Presentists can plausibly endorse nothingism about [WAS-Dino]. (iv) The unrestricted truthmaking principle is false. (v) Nothingism about [WAS-Dino] is true.

**5.7 Generalizing to Other ‘WAS’-Sentences:** Everything I’ve said here about [Was-Dino] can be said about other ‘WAS’-sentences—or, more precisely, other sentences of the form ‘WAS(*P*)’ that presentists think are true and in which the embedded sentence *P* is purely about the past.

6 THE PAST-TENSE SENTENCES OF ORDINARY ENGLISH

I don’t need this, but I think the same argument motivates nothingism about folk sentences like ‘There used to be dinosaurs.’

7. OBJECTIONS AND RESPONSES

**Objection 1:** “You seem to be saying that the Presentoids can stipulate that their claims are true; but no one can do that.”

**Response:** I’m not saying that. People can stipulate what they mean by their words, but they can’t stipulate that their claims are *true*. I am *not* saying that the Presentoids can stipulate that [Was-Dino] is true in their language. All they’re stipulating is that, in their language, [Was-Dino] makes a pure WAS-claim—and that it doesn’t say anything about the nature of reality. The reason [Was-Dino] is true in Presentish isn’t because the Presentoids *say* it’s true; it’s because *there used to be dinosaurs*.

**Objection 2:** “(1) You seem to begiving up on the principle that *Truth Supervenes on Being* (TSB); for [Was-Dino] isn’t true in Swamp-World, which is a physical duplicate of the actual world that popped into existence 5 minutes ago. And (2) this gives rise to an epistemic worry: How can we know which sentences about the past are true? If Swamp-world and the actual world are physically identical, then how can we know which world we’re living in? And how can we know whether [Was-Dino] is true?”

**Response:** (1) Yes, I’m giving up on TSB—my argument shows that it’s false. (2a) We can know that [Was-Dino] is true by using presently existing evidence, e.g., fossils—and that’s the only way eternalists can know that it’s true. (2b) I don’t know how to answer the skeptical question ‘How do we know that we’re not living in Swamp-world?’; but presentists are no worse off here than eternalists are.

**Objection 3:** “I don’t even *understand* [WAS-Dino], given it means what you’re saying it means.”

**Response:** Presumably you understand the past-tense operator ‘WAS’; so you must mean that you don’t understand what someone is saying when they claim to make a *pure WAS-claim*. But why is that hard?

**Objection 4:**“If your argument were right, then we could endorse (S1)-(S6) without committing to the existence of numbers, or mereological sums, or immaterial persons, or moral facts or properties. But this is implausible; so something must be wrong with your argument.

(S1) 3 is prime—i.e., the number 3 has the property of primeness.

(S2) The object composed of my nose and the moon is discontiguous.

(S3) Obama is numerically distinct from his body.

(S4) Putin is a morally bad person.

**Response:** My argument *doesn’t* generalize to these other sentences. For there’s no plausible way to maintain that these sentences are *not about reality*. They all refer to specific objects and say that those objects have certain properties. So they all make claims about how things *are*.

**Objection 5:** “Even if your view works, find-the-truthmaker presentism is superior because it enables us to account for our intuition that truth supervenes on being and that truth always requires truthmaking.”

**Response:** (i) I’ve already argued that truth doesn’t supervene on being and doesn’t always require truthmaking. (ii) Find-the-truthmaker presentism is metaphysically implausible and extravagant (see, e.g., the Swamp-world problem).

8. DISTINGUISHING NOTHINGISM FROM A NEARBY VIEW