

Presentism without fatalism*

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1. Introduction

Presentism is an ontological thesis. Presentists are committed to saying that only present things exist, nothing is at a temporal distance from anything else, the most inclusive quantifier ranges over only those things that are present, and everything that exists is simultaneous with everything else. I shall take it that presentism is the thesis that: *for all x , x is present.*¹

Libertarianism is the conjunction of the free will thesis and incompatibilism with respect to free will and determinism [van Inwagen 2008]. The free will thesis is that sometimes there is an act and a time such that an agent is able to perform that action at that time and the agent is able to refrain from performing that action at that time.² Incompatibilism is the thesis that it is impossible that both determinism and the free-will thesis be true. Determinism is the thesis that the conjunction of the past and the laws of nature entails a unique future. I shall take libertarianism to be the thesis that: where S ranges over agents, $\Box(\forall S \neg(S \text{ acts freely and determinism is true})) \ \& \ \exists S(S \text{ acts freely})$.

Bivalence says that every proposition is either true or false.³ Bivalence, then, is the thesis that: *for all propositions p , p is true or p is false.*⁴

Michael Rea has recently argued that the conjunction of presentism, libertarianism, and bivalence is inconsistent.⁵ As I have defined them, then, Rea argues that the following conjunction is necessarily false: *for all x , x is present* \wedge $(\Box(\forall S \neg(S \text{ acts freely and determinism is true})) \ \& \ \exists S(S \text{ acts freely})) \ \wedge \ \forall p(p \text{ or } \neg p)$.

In this paper, I argue that he fails. One of the premises of his argument is ambiguous;

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¹Those who are worried that this is trivial should see Crisp (2003).

²Of course, 'is able to' here has narrow scope, so one cannot infer from " S is able to do A at t and S is able to refrain from doing A at t " that S is able to do $(A$ and not- $A)$ at t .

³I will speak of propositions as the fundamental bearers of truth and falsity. If you disagree, feel free to substitute whatever you think are the fundamental bearers of truth and falsity; nothing should hang on this.

⁴Or, if one wishes to avoid a truth predicate: *for all propositions p , p or $\neg p$.*

⁵The argument is presented in Rea (2006). It is clear from the title and the text that he thinks presentism ought to go.

on one reading, the premise in question is false, and on the other reading of the premise in question, the conclusion of the argument must be read in such a way that it does not entail the denial of libertarianism.

2. Rea's Argument

The following is Rea's argument. It assumes the truth of presentism and bivalence and concludes with the denial of libertarianism.

(M₁) Presentism is true. (Assumption)

(M₂) *Sally will stand 1000 years hence* was true at t^* . (Assumption)^{6,7}

(M₃) If presentism is true and if *Sally will stand 1000 years hence* was true at t^* , then the truth of *Sally will stand 1000 years hence* at t^* was not even partly grounded in the occurrence of any event involving Sally or in any exercising of her agent-causal power. (Premise)

(M₄) Therefore: The truth of *Sally will stand 1000 years hence* at t^* was not even partly grounded in the occurrence of any event involving Sally, or in any exercising of her agent-causal power. (From M₁, M₂, M₃)

(M₅) If the truth of a proposition p at a past time t_n was not even partly grounded in the occurrence of any event involving S , or in the agent causal activity of S , then S has never had and will never have a choice about whether p was true at t_n . (Premise)

(M₆) Therefore: Sally has never had and will never have a choice about whether M₂ is true. (From M₂, M₄, M₅)

(M₇) M₂ entails that Sally stands now (at t , one thousand years later than t^*). (Trivial)

(β_3) If p and if x never had and never will have a choice about p , and if p entails q , then x never had and never will have a choice about q . (Premise)

(M₈) Therefore: Sally has never had and will never have a choice about whether *Sally will stand 1000 years hence* is true. (From M₂, M₆, M₇, β_3 .)

It is worth noting that this is not merely an argument that presentism, libertarianism and bivalence are inconsistent. It is an argument that they, combined with other assumptions, are inconsistent. These assumptions are: that the world is at least 1000 years old, that there are propositions about non-existent things, and β_3 . So, one could

⁶Here and throughout, I use italicized declarative sentences as names for propositions expressed by those sentences.

⁷Since Sally does not exist at t^* , this assumption denies existentialism, the thesis that singular propositions existentially depend on the things they're about. The existentialist has a response to the argument; deny M₂.

deny any or all of these additional assumptions in order to block the argument. That said, let us grant the extra assumptions.

The argument trades on an ambiguity in M2. Once this ambiguity is exposed, either the resulting reading of M7 is false, or the resulting readings of M7 and M8 do not entail the denial of libertarianism. The easiest way to see the ambiguity is with a parody argument intended to establish the inconsistency of actualism, bivalence, and libertarianism.

3. A Parody Argument

Presentism is often explained by analogy to actualism. In this section, I exploit this analogy to give a parody of Rea's argument. First, a point must be made. The presentist thinks of times as abstract objects. Times are maximal, consistent conjunctions of propositions that are ordered by earlier-than and later-than relations, forming an ersatz B-series.⁸ The ersatz B-series is contingent; that is, the times that stand in the B-relations exist necessarily, but *that* they stand in the B-relations is contingently true. So, a proposition p is true at a time t just in the case that t includes p ; that is, t has p as a conjunct. And for any t^* such that t^* stands in a B-relation to t , it is contingent that t and t^* stand in that B-relation. Possible worlds are abstract objects, as are times.⁹ They are both maximal consistent conjunctions or classes of propositions. Everyone thinks that there are relations between possible worlds. One such relation is *is accessible from*; at least some worlds are accessible from others, and in fact most people think that every possible world is accessible from every other world.¹⁰ The accessibility relation is an equivalence relation. But, there are other relations that hold between worlds, and not all are equivalence relations.

Some of them are nearness relations. These relations are of use in evaluating the truth or falsity of counterfactuals.¹¹ In order to find out if the counterfactual $A \Box \rightarrow B$ is true, one goes to the nearest world where A is true, and looks to see if B is true in that world.

Nearness relations fall under the more general category of ordering relations. It seems

⁸For more on this, see Crisp (2007).

⁹At any rate, that's how I and many others think of them. Those who are unwilling to think of them that way can read the conclusion of this paper as a conditional: if times are abstract objects, then... But I take it that most presentists, in order to answer objections, need to invoke an abstract time series.

¹⁰This is a modal logic including S5.

¹¹See Lewis (1973) and Stalnaker and Thomason (1970) and Stalnaker (1968) for various uses of nearness relations.

that there is at least one ordering relation by which all possible worlds are ordered, since there are worlds nearer to each other than to other worlds.¹² And if there is such a relation, then there can be measures on it. Much like years are measures on the ordered series of times, let us say that zears are measures on the ordered series of possible worlds. So the *n zears from* relation is the possible worlds analog of the *n years from* relation that holds between times.

Here, then, is a parody of Rea's argument. Assume that Sally does not exist in *W*, and that α (the world that happens to be actual) is 1000 zears from *W*.

PARODY:

(M1*) Actualism is true. (Assumption)

(M2*) *Sally stands 1000 zears hence* is true at *W*. (Assumption)¹³

(M3*) If actualism is true and if *Sally stands 1000 zears hence* is true at *W*, then the truth of *Sally stands 1000 zears hence* at *W* is not even partly grounded in the occurrence of any event involving Sally or in any exercising of her agent-causal power. (Premise)

(M4*) Therefore: The truth of *Sally stands 1000 zears hence* at *W* is not even partly grounded in the occurrence of any event involving Sally, or in any exercising of her agent-causal power. (From M1*, M2*, M3*)

(M5*) If the truth of a proposition *p* at a possible world *W* is not even partly grounded in the occurrence of any event involving *S*, or in the agent causal activity of *S*, then *S* has no choice about whether *p* is true at *W*. (Premise)

(M6*) Therefore: Sally has no choice about whether M2* is true. (From M2*, M4*, M5*)

(M7*) M2* entails that Sally stands in the actual world (at α , one thousand zears from *W*). (Trivial)

(β_3) If *p* and if *x* has no choice about *p*, and if *p* entails *q*, then *x* has no choice about *q*. (Premise)

(M8*) Therefore: Sally has no choice about whether *Sally stands 1000 zears hence* is true. (From M2*, M6*, M7*, β_3 .)

Since the world that happens to be the actual world is 1000 zears from *W*, one might think that PARODY shows that Sally has no choice about whether she stands. But clearly there is a problem; certainly actualism, libertarianism and bivalence are consistent! And whatever the problem is with PARODY, I argue that there is an analogous problem with Rea's argument.

¹²We ought to grant this, since our best theory of counterfactual semantics entails it.

¹³Like M2, M2* denies existentialism.

Here is the problem with PARODY. Look again at $M2^*$, and imagine a speaker in W contemplating the sentence ‘Sally stands 1000 zears hence.’ There is an ambiguity in the term ‘hence.’ When taken in one sense, an expression in which it appears designates rigidly (‘1000 zears from W ’). In the other sense, an expression in which it appears designates non-rigidly (‘1000 zears from the actual world’). $M2^*$, then, is logically equivalent to one of the following, but not both. First:

$M2^*_{Rigid}$: *Sally stands 1000 zears from W* is true at W

Or:

$M2^*_{Non-Rigid}$: *Sally stands 1000 zears from the actual world* is true at W ¹⁴

$M2^*_{Rigid}$ is necessarily true, and Sally does not have a choice about its truth. Furthermore, since it is necessarily true, we cannot get to $M7^*$. All we can get is:

$M7^*_{Rigid}$: $M2^*$ entails that Sally stands at α

But $M7^*_{Rigid}$ is also a necessary truth, and of course Sally does not have a choice about it. But then the conclusion of the argument must also be a necessary truth.

$M8^*_{Rigid}$: Therefore: Sally has no choice about whether *Sally stands 1000 zears hence* is true.

If ‘1000 zears hence’ rigidly designates α , then this is equivalent to

$M8^*_{Rigid}$: Therefore: Sally has no choice about whether *Sally stands at α* is true.

And this does not entail the denial of libertarianism. So, reading $M2^*$ as $M2^*_{Rigid}$ does not show that actualism, bivalence, and libertarianism are inconsistent.

However, $M2^*_{Non-Rigid}$ is not necessarily true. Presumably Sally does have a choice about its truth, since she has a choice about which world is actual. But if PARODY is sound, she does not. So, what happens to the rest of the argument? Well, it is a contingent fact that $M2^*_{Non-Rigid}$ is true, which is to say that there are worlds in which it is not true. But then $M7^*$ is logically equivalent to the following:

¹⁴Of course, at W , W is actual.

$M7^*_{Non-Rigid}$: Necessarily, if *Sally stands 1000 years from the actual world* is true at W , then Sally stands in the actual world.

But that is false. After all, it might have been the case that the world 1000 years from W (α , say) not be the actual world. So, there is a problem with PARODY. On one reading, its conclusion does not entail the inconsistency of actualism, bivalence, and libertarianism. On the other reading, it is unsound in virtue of $M7^*_{Non-Rigid}$ being false.

4. Rea's Argument Revisited

Look again at M_2 , and imagine a speaker at t contemplating the sentence 'Sally stands 1000 years hence.' There is an ambiguity in the term 'hence.' When taken in one sense, an expression in which it appears designates rigidly ('1000 years after t '). In the other sense, an expression in which it appears designates non-rigidly ('1000 years after the present time'). M_2 , then, is logically equivalent to one of the following, but not both. First:

M_{2Rigid} : *Sally stands 1000 years after t^** is true at t^*

Or:

$M_{2Non-Rigid}$: *Sally stands 1000 years after the present time* is true at t^*

M_{2Rigid} is eternally true. Since it is eternally true, it cannot entail temporary truths; we cannot get to M_7 . All we can get is:

M_{7Rigid} : M_2 entails that Sally stands at t

But M_{7Rigid} is also eternally true, and of course Sally does not have a choice about it, since it is true iff t includes *Sally stands*. But then the conclusion of the argument must also be eternally true.

M_{8Rigid} : Therefore: Sally has no choice about whether *Sally stands 1000 years hence* is true.

But if '1000 years hence' rigidly designates t , then this is equivalent to

M_{8Rigid}^* : Therefore: Sally has no choice about whether *Sally stands at t* is true.

And this does not entail the falsity of libertarianism. Recall that the presentist thinks of times as maximal, consistent conjunctions of propositions that are ordered by earlier-than and later-than relations, forming an ersatz B-series. If *p is true 1000 years from now* is true at t , that means that *p is true at t^** and t is 1000 years earlier than t^* . That, in turn, means that t^* includes p , and t is 1000 years earlier than t^* . Of course, it is necessary that t^* includes p , but it is contingent that t is the present time, and contingent that t^* is 1000 years later than t . So, reading M_2 as M_{2Rigid} does not show that presentism, bivalence, and libertarianism are inconsistent.

However, $M_{2Non-Rigid}$ is not eternally true. Presumably Sally does have a choice about its truth, since she has a choice about which time is the present time. But if Rea's argument is sound, she does not. So, what goes wrong? Well, it is a temporary truth that $M_{2Non-Rigid}$ is true, which is to say that there are times at which it is not true. But then M_7 is logically equivalent to the following:

$M_{7Non-Rigid}$: Necessarily, if *Sally stands 1000 years after the present time* is true at t , then Sally stands at the present time.

But that is false. After all, it might have been the case that the time 1000 years after t (t^* , say) not be the present time (since the B-relations between times hold contingently). So, Rea's argument is faulty. On one reading, its conclusion does not entail the inconsistency of presentism, bivalence, and libertarianism. On the other reading, it is unsound in virtue of $M_{7Non-Rigid}$ being false.

Here is another way to think about this. Had Sally not stood at t , then t^* would not have stood in the 1000-years-earlier-than relation to t , since t^* has as a conjunct *Sally stands 1000 years hence*, and had Sally not stood 1000 years hence, that conjunct would have been false.

This suffices for Sally to be free with respect to standing at t . Recall that S is free at t with respect to A just in the case that S is able to do A at t and S is able to refrain from doing A at t . This condition is satisfied, so Sally stands freely.

More simply, even if Sally has no choice at W about whether she stands 1000 years hence, she does have a choice about whether α (the world 1000 years from W) is the

actual world.¹⁵ Similarly, even if Sally has never had and never will have a choice about whether she stands 1000 years after t^* , she does have a choice about whether t (the time 1000 years from t^*) is present.¹⁶ Namely, she can choose not to stand in 1000 years, in which case t^* would not have been the present time. So the inconsistency is not established.

Note that this is the same response that libertarians give to the general problem of fatalism. That problem is this: it was either true yesterday that *I will stand tomorrow at 2pm*, or it was false. If it was true, I have to stand. If it was false, I cannot. Therefore, I am not free with respect to standing. This generalizes to show that I am not free with respect to any action. And it is true whether or not determinism is true. But this is wrong (at least in indeterministic worlds), the libertarian says, because I have counterfactual power over the past.¹⁷ I can do something today (sit) such that, were I to do it, it would have been true yesterday that *I will sit tomorrow at 2pm*.

The idea is that some propositions are about the present, some are about the past, and some are about the future. Further, some propositions about the past and future are *hard facts* and some are *soft facts*. Hard facts are, you might say, solely about the past, while soft facts are not. This distinction is employed against the problem of fatalism by claiming that we have *counterfactual power* over soft facts.

For any S and action ϕ and time t , if it is true prior to t that *S will ϕ at t* , in virtue of what does S have a choice at t about whether or not she ϕ s? The answer is that S has counterfactual power over whether *S will ϕ at t* is true prior to t . If she would have refrained from ϕ ing at t , then it would not have been true prior to t that *S will ϕ at t* . So says the libertarian.

It is fairly straightforward to see how the story will go from here. Take two times t_1 and t_2 . Consider a person Sally and an action ϕ , and let us say it is true at t_2 that *Sally ϕ s*. So it is true at t_1 that *Sally will ϕ* . So t_1 stands in the relation earlier-than to t_2 . According to the libertarian, Sally could have chosen not to ϕ at t_2 , in which case it would have been false prior to t_2 that *Sally will ϕ* . So a different time, say t_1^* would have stood in the earlier-than relation to t_2 , and at t_1^* it is false that *Sally will ϕ* .

¹⁵Remember that ' α ' rigidly designates the actual world. So α is the name for a conjunction or class of propositions that are true. But of course, a world other than α could have been the actual world.

¹⁶Since times are maximal conjunctions or classes of propositions, a time is present just in the case that it's true.

¹⁷That is, I have counterfactual power over the soft past, which is not to say that I have counterfactual power over the hard past.

5. Conclusion

Michael Rea has offered an argument that presentism, bivalence, and libertarianism is inconsistent. I have shown that Rea's argument does not establish their inconsistency, as it trades on an ambiguity in premise M₂. On one way of disambiguating M₂, it is false. On the other way of disambiguating M₂, it is true, but the rest of the argument must be modified, and the resulting conclusion does not establish the inconsistency of presentism, bivalence, and libertarianism. Thus, Rea's argument gives the libertarian no reason to deny presentism.

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