One sometimes hears the following argument put against presentism. Presentists say: "Only present things exist." But consider the verb "exist" in the quoted sentence. Is it tensed or untensed? Suppose tensed: then the presentist's thesis amounts to the claim that only present things exist now—a trivial truism. Suppose untensed: then her thesis is equivalent to the claim that only present things existed, exist or will exist—a manifest falsehood: plenty of things (e.g., the Roman Empire) existed or will exist which aren't present. The upshot: presentism is a trivial truism or an obvious falsehood. Either way, it's not a very interesting piece of metaphysics.[1]

Let us call this the "triviality argument" against presentism. I shall argue for two claims in this paper. First, the triviality argument is unsound. And second, its conclusion is false: presentism is neither banal nor manifestly false. I begin by spelling out the triviality argument more carefully.

1. The Triviality Argument Explained

Presentists say that only present things exist.[2] But the sentence

(Pr) Only present things exist

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[1] Lawrence Lombard raises a version of this objection in his 1999, 254-255, as does Craig Callender in his 2000, S588-S589. For discussion, see Sider 1999, 325-327; Zimmerman 1998, 209-210; Merricks 1995, 523 and 1999, 421-422; Hinchliff 2000, S576-S577; and Rea 2003.

[2] This way of putting the thesis, or something close to it, is fairly common in the literature. Bigelow characterizes presentism as the thesis that "nothing exists which is not present" (1996, 35); Markosian thinks of it as the view that "necessarily, it is always true that only present objects exist" (forthcoming, n. 1). Merricks suggests that presentism is the thesis that "all that exists, exists at the present time" (1995, 523). Zimmerman characterizes it as the thesis that "the only things that exist are those that exist at present" (1998, 209).

is ambiguous. Its verb "exist" plausibly admits of a tenseless and two tensed readings. Each reading of the verb yields a slightly different thesis. Presentism, let us assume, is one of these three theses.

We begin with the tensed readings of (Pr). There are two plausible options. We could take its verb as present tensed, yielding:

(Pr$_a$) only present things exist now (i.e., at present),

But this, presumably, is not what the presentist has in mind since (Pr$_a$) is a trivial truism: for what is a "present thing" but a thing which exists at present?

Perhaps the presentist means (Pr)'s "exist" is to be read *disjunctively*, yielding:

(Pr$_b$) Only present things existed, exist or will exist.

But (Pr$_b$) is manifestly false: the Roman Empire existed but isn't a present thing; my great grandchildren will exist but aren't present things. So it's false that only present things existed, exist or will exist.

If "exist" isn't plausibly regarded as tensed, maybe it's a tenseless verb, one which indicates nothing about pastness, presentness or futurity. Some who "take tense seriously" will object that there *are* no tenseless verbs.[3] But let us suppose they're wrong and that presentism is the claim that

(Pr$_c$) only present things (tenselessly) exist.

A brief comment about (Pr$_c$). Some think that numbers, properties and the like exist *timelessly* or *atemporally*. (Pr$_c$) should not be read as the claim that only present things exist in this way. To be a present thing is to be a temporal thing, a thing which exists *in time*. The presentist may

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[3] See for instance Smith 1996, chapter 6 ; Tichy 1980, 177-179.

be benighted, but he doesn't mean to claim that only present things exist timelessly or atemporally.

How then are we to understand (Pr_c)? The idea here is that we can speak of a thing as "existing" without thereby saying anything about whether it exists now, in the past or in the future. To say of x that it exists in this sense is to claim merely that our most inclusive quantifiers range over x. x may be past, present or future; we say nothing about *which* when we say of x that our widest quantifiers "pick it up." So, to say that only present things (tenselessly) exist is to say something like: for every x (using our most unrestricted quantifier), x is a present thing.

Could the presentist have this reading of (Pr) in mind? Once again, presumably not since it's a simple matter of logic that if, for every x, x is a present thing, then for every x, x existed, exists or will exist only if x is a present thing. But notice: to claim that, for every x, x is a G only if x is an F is just to claim that only Fs are Gs. So to say that, for every x, x existed, exists or will exist only if x is a present thing is to say that only present things existed, exist or will exist. And the latter claim, recall, is just (Pr_b), a trivial falsehood. (Pr_c) implies a trivial falsehood. Since it's obvious that this is so, it's obvious that (Pr_c) is false.

We can now put the triviality argument precisely. First, we suppose that presentism is one of the theses yielded by disambiguation of (Pr). There are three plausible disambiguations, (Pr_a), (Pr_b) and (Pr_c); so

(P1) Presentism is either (Pr_a), (Pr_b) or (Pr_c).

But

(P2) (Pr_a) is trivially true, and

(P3) (Pr_b) and (Pr_c) are trivially false.

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Accordingly

(C) Presentism is either a trivial truism or a manifest falsehood.

Fortunately for the presentist, the foregoing argument is unsound.

2. The Triviality Argument Examined

(P3) says that it is manifestly false that only present things existed, exist or will exist.

Says the objector: this is manifestly false because there were and will be things which aren't now

present—e.g., the Roman Empire, my great grandchildren. Since it's manifestly true that there

were and will be things which aren't now present, it's manifestly false that only present things

existed, exist or will exist.

But here there is confusion. Again, to say that only Fs are Gs is to say that, for every x, if

x is a G, then x is an F. Thus to say that only present things existed, exist or will exist is to say

that

(Pr$_b$') For every x, if x existed, exists or will exist, then x is a present thing.

(Pr$_b$') invokes an *unrestricted* quantifier, one that ranges over *everything*. The presentist who

construes her thesis thus proposes of each thing x in our most inclusive domain of quantification

that if x existed, exists or will exist then x is a present thing. We can state the same thing

differently by shifting to a restricted quantifier, one whose domain is restricted to the class of all

things in time, the class of all things which existed, exist now, or will exist. (Of course, for those

of us who think *all* things are temporal things, this amounts to no restriction at all.) Then we get:

(Pr$_b$'') For every x, x is a present thing,

where here we quantify restrictedly over the domain of all things in time—henceforth, D$_t$.

The triviality objector proposes that (Pr$_b$'') is trivially false and points to the Roman

Empire as an obvious counterexample. The idea, presumably, is that D$_t$ includes

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something—viz., the Roman Empire—which existed but is not present. But is it an obvious truth that D_t includes something identical with the Roman Empire which existed and is no longer present? Clearly not. Here we need to distinguish between the *de dicto* assertion that

(RE₁) *WAS*(for some x, x is the Roman Empire and x will not exist in t_α),

where "t_α" names the present moment, and the *de re* assertion that

(RE₂) For some x, x was the Roman Empire and x is no longer present.

RE₁ is a *de dicto* claim predicating past truth of the proposition [for some x, x is the Roman Empire and x will not exist in t_α]. Most everyone—presentist or no—will grant that RE₁ is an obvious truth.[4] RE₂ is a *de re* claim to the effect that the open sentence "x was the Roman Empire and x is no longer present" is satisfied by some *res* in D_t. This claim isn't nearly as obvious. It's certainly no Moorean fact[5] that the domain of temporal things is still populated with something non-present and identical with the Roman Empire. Were it a Moorean fact that *eternalism*—the view that our most inclusive domain of quantification includes past, present and future entities—is true, I suppose it would be a Moorean fact that D_t includes the Roman Empire. But it's not just *obvious* that eternalism is true: it's not just obvious that our widest domain of quantification still includes wholly past objects like the Roman Empire. If eternalism is true, we need serious argument to see that it is.

If there is an obvious truth in the neighborhood, then, it's the truth expressed by RE₁. But this truth is consistent with the claim that, quantifying over all things in time, for every x, x is present. It thus provides no counterexample to (Pr_b''). Similar comments apply to the

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[4] Let us set aside those of us in the grip of philosophy who doubt there are such things as empires.

[5] To borrow from Armstrong: "one of the many facts which even philosophers should not deny" (1978, 440-441).

suggestion that (Pr$_b$'') is false because there will be things—e.g., my great grandchildren—which aren't yet.

The triviality objector's argument for the claim that (Pr$_b$'') is trivially false is less than impressive. Moreover, (Pr$_b$'') is *not* trivially false. No doubt some philosophers take themselves to have good reason for thinking eternalism true and (Pr$_b$'') false. Perhaps they do have good reason. Again though, it's not just *obvious* that the domain of temporal things includes non-present objects. Eternalism might *be* true, but seeing this requires substantive metaphysical argument.

I conclude that my opponent is mistaken in thinking that (Pr$_b$'') is manifestly false. Thus I reject premise (P3) of her argument. The triviality argument is unsound.

3. Neither Trivially False nor Trivially True

Not only is the triviality argument unsound, its conclusion is false. Let us think of presentism as the thesis expressed by (Pr$_b$'').[6] According to (C), this thesis is either a trivial truism or a manifest falsehood. I've already argued that it's not manifestly false. It's obvious, I think, that it's also not trivially true. Suppose that eternalism is true. Then our most inclusive domain of quantification includes wholly past and wholly future objects, where these are objects that occupy past times or future times, but not the present time. If so, then it's false that, for every x—quantifying over all temporal entities—x is a present thing. The Roman Empire existed, for instance, and it isn't a present thing. Since, according to the eternalist, the domain of temporal things includes the Roman Empire, if eternalism is true, (Pr$_b$'') isn't. But eternalism

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[6] This way of putting presentism isn't quite right. To put the thesis most accurately, we need the "ALWAYS" operator: presentism is the claim that it's *always* the case that, for every x, x existed, exists or will exist only if x is a present thing. Else, for a brief moment, presentism is true in a Broad/Tooley style growing block universe with a first moment (see Broad 1923: 53-84; Tooley 1997) . Some think that a further emendation is needed, the addition of a "□". I won't take a stand on that here.

isn't manifestly false: I, at any rate, can't just *see* that the domain of temporal things includes no wholly past or future entities. Since eternalism isn't manifestly false, (Pr_b'') isn't trivially true.

I conclude that the triviality argument against presentism fails. Its failure is two-fold: it is unsound and its conclusion is false.

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