

PRIOR'S PRESENTISM

Ted Sider
Intro Metaphysics

1. Reality

Philosophers often speak as if the real world were just one of a number of different big boxes in which various things go on, the other boxes having such labels as ‘the mind’ or ‘the world of Greek mythology’. For example, centaurs exist in the world of Greek mythology but not in the real world, aeroplanes exist in the real world but not in the world of Greek mythology, and horses and men exist both in the real world and in the world of Greek mythology. Again, Anselm addresses himself to people who held that God does not exist in the real world but only in the mind, and claimed to have a proof that if God exists in the mind he must exist in the real world too. Leibniz contrasted the real or actual world with an infinity of merely possible worlds in which various things happen which do not happen in the actual world. All these ways of talking suggest that the real world or the actual world is just a *region* of some larger universe which contains other regions as well—possible worlds, imaginary worlds, and so on.

...this way of conceiving the relation between the real and the unreal is profoundly mistaken and misleading. The most important way in which it is misleading is that it minimises, or makes a purely arbitrary matter, the vast and stark difference that there is between the real and every form of unreality. (Prior, p. 129)

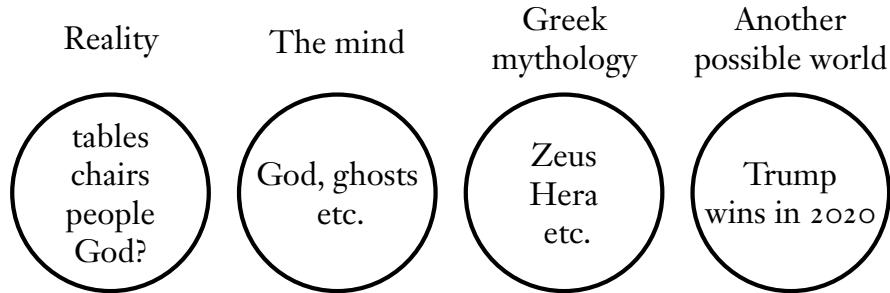
Sentences like these suggest a misleading picture:

In Greek Mythology, Zeus exists

God exists in the mind (as even the fool will admit)

Trump wins the 2020 election in another possible world

Tables and chairs exist in reality



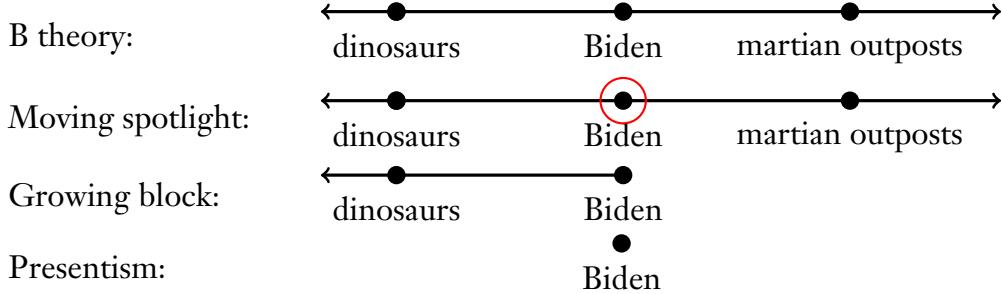
...to say that X is the case in some non-real world is just to say ‘ X is the case’ with some modifying prefix like ‘Greek myth-makers have said that’, ‘Jones imagines that’, or ‘It could be that’. But to say that X is the case in the real or the actual world, or that it is really or actually or in fact the case, is just to say that it is the case—flat, and without any prefix whatever. To say that there are centaurs in the real world, for example, is not to say that there are centaurs in some region of the universe in which we happen to have more interest than in others; it is simply to say that *there are centaurs*. (Prior, p. 130)

What the sentences really mean are:

- According to Greek Mythology, Zeus exists
- Many people believe that God exists
- It might have been the case that Trump won in 2020
- Tables and chairs exist

2. Presentism

It is tempting to think of the present as a region of the universe in which certain things happen, such as the war in Vietnam, and the past and the future as other regions in which other things happen, such as the battle of Hastings and men going to Mars. But to this picture there is the same objection as to the picture of the ‘real world’ as a box or region among other boxes or regions. It doesn’t bring out what is so *special* about the present; and to be more specific, it doesn’t bring out the way in which the present is *real* and the past and future are not. (Prior, pp. 130–1)



Presentism (ontological part) Only present objects exist; there are no (merely) future or past objects.

3. Puzzles with time's passage

...other changes in events... are ones which go on in the event *while it is occurring*; for example, if a lecture gets duller or a movement faster then this is something it does *as it goes on*; but the change from past to still further past isn't one that occurs while the event is occurring...

Indeed, he says, the change occurs when the event no longer *exists*.

4. Tenses and grammar

...most of the present group of problems about time and change, though not quite all of them, arise from the fact that many expressions which look like nouns, i.e. names of objects, are not really nouns at all but concealed verbs, and many expressions which look like verbs are not really verbs but concealed conjunctions and adverbs.

Category	Examples	Function
Name	Ted, Iverson	to refer to something
Sentence	Ted is a philosopher Ted admires Iverson	to make a statement
Verb	is a philosopher, admires	to attribute characteristics
Adverb	possibly, it is not the case that	Adverb + Sentence = Sentence
Conjunction	And, If...then	Sent. + Conj. + Sent. = Sent.

Tenses, according to Prior, are adverbial phrases. E.g. "It was the case that" + "It is raining" = "It was the case that it is raining"

Sentences formed by adverbial phrases or conjunctions aren't about words, or propositions, or any such entities. For example, this sentence is just about me and Mike:

If I am older than Mike, then Mike is younger than me

Even though we tend to rephrase it as:

My being older than Mike implies Mike's being younger than me

The fact is that it is difficult for the human mind to get beyond the simple subject-predicate or noun-verb structure, and when a sentence or thought hasn't that structure but a more complex one we try in various ways to force it into the subject-predicate pattern. We thus invent new modes of speech in which the subordinate sentences are replaced by noun-phrases and the conjunctions or adverbs by verbs or verb-phrases. (p. 138)

5. Down with events

What appears to be about an event moving through time...

My falling out of a punt has receded six years into the past

...really isn't about an event at all:

It is now six years since it was the case that I am falling out of a punt

What I am suggesting is that what looks like talk about events is really at bottom talk about things, and that what looks like talk about changes in events is really just slightly more complicated talk about changes in things. (p. 43)

6. Merely past objects

Queen Anne's death has receded 250 years into the past

250 years in the past, Queen Anne died

250 years in the past, someone was called 'Anne', reigned over England... and died

7. The presentist conception of time and change

Presentism Only present objects exist; there are no (merely) future or past objects. The facts about time are stated using tensed sentences such as “It was the case 45 years ago that Ted is in sixth grade”. The tensed prefixes in these sentences are irreducible. Change can be described using such sentences without temporal parts or relativizing to times.

8. Tenses and the spotlight and growing block

Defenders of the spotlight theory or growing block could understand their problematic notions of A-change using Prior's tensed prefixes:

The spotlight is on 2022; but it will be the case in one year that it is on 2023.

The growing block ends at 2022. But it will be the case in one year that another year's worth of events are located after 2022.

9. Freedom

One of the big differences between the past and the future is that once something has become past, it is, as it were, out of our reach—once a thing has happened, nothing we can do can make it not to have happened. But the future is to some extent, even though it is only to a very small extent, something we can make for ourselves. And this is a distinction which a tenseless logic is unable to express. In my own logic with tenses I would express it this way: We can lay it down as a law that whatever *now* is the case *will always have been* the case; but we can't interchange past and future here and lay it down that whatever *now* is the case *has always been going to be* the case—I don't think that's a logical law at all; for if something is the work of a free agent, then it wasn't going to be the case until that agent decided that it was. (Prior, p. 162)

- ✓ If my right hand is raised, then it will be the case in 7 years that it was the case 7 years ago that my right hand is raised
- ✗ If my right hand is raised, then it was the case 7 years ago that it will be the case in 7 years that my right hand is raised

10. “Thank goodness that’s over”

I have a very good friend and colleague in Australia, Professor Smart of Adelaide, with whom I often have arguments about this. He’s an advocate of the tapestry view of time, and says that when we say ‘ X is now past’, we just mean ‘The latest part of X is earlier than this utterance.’ But, when at the end of some ordeal I say ‘Thank goodness that’s over’, do I mean ‘Thank goodness the latest part of that is earlier than this utterance?’ I certainly do not; I’m not thinking about the utterance at all, it’s the *overness*, the *now-endedness*, the *pastness* of the thing that I’m thankful for, and nothing else (Prior, pp. 163–4)

1. If the B theory is true, then when I say “Thank goodness that’s over”, I’m relieved that the ordeal is before my utterance.
2. But I knew before the ordeal that the ordeal would be before the utterance, and I wasn’t relieved then.
3. If 2 is true, then when I say “Thank goodness that’s over”, I’m not relieved that the ordeal is before my utterance.
4. Therefore, the B theory is false