

Giuliano Torrengo

TENSELESS TIME VS. TENSED TRUTHMAKERS

Abstract. In a recent article in *Dialectica*, Dean Zimmerman has argued that the eternalist A-theorist (a.k.a. “moving spotlight” theorist) can distinguish her position from that of the B-theorist serious tensor, only by appealing to a «non-relativized kind of truth that applies to propositions that are only temporarily true» (Zimmerman, 2005, p. 453), namely a notion of truth simpliciter as applied to tensed propositions. In what follows I will argue that this notion is spurious, and cannot do the job. My critique’s outline will remind Bergmann’s critiques against “monsters”, namely notions which, appearances notwithstanding, are irremediably blurred. The difference between the B-theorist serious tensor, and the eternalist A-theorist has rather to be drawn as a difference on whether tensed sentences require tensed truth-makers or not. My starting point will be a short *détour* through the debate over temporary intrinsics and presentism.

I. As Kelly Haslinger has recently noticed, presentists and four-dimensionalists are partly allied in their charge against the non-presentist three-dimensionalists in the debate over temporary intrinsics³. They agree on two tenets, concerning ordinary properties and tensed predication respectively:

(OP) Temporary intrinsic properties (such as being bent or being straight) are neither properties indexed to times, nor relations to times;

³ Very roughly, I will distinguish a *metaphysical*, an *ontological* and a *semantic* aspect in the philosophy of time, which are related to the problem of temporary intrinsics (the *locus classicus* of the problem is Lewis, 1986, pp. 202-205). The distinction between A-theory and B-theory is metaphysical. According to the A-theory, the passage of time is real, and, thus, tense determinations (such as being *present*, *past*, and *future*) are genuine features of reality. According to the B-theory tense determinations are reducible to relations between a perceiver and a position in time. The distinction between the presentist and the eternalist is ontological. According to the presentist, in our most unrestricted domain of quantification we find only presently existing entities, whereas according to the eternalist also past and future entities exist. The distinction between the serious tensor and the de-tensor is semantic. According to the *serious tensor* tensed sentences express tensed propositions, namely propositions that are temporally *undetermined* (their truth-value being possibly variable through time), whereas according to the *de-tensor* tensed sentences express tenseless propositions, namely propositions that are temporally determined (bearing a determined truth-value regardless of time).

(TP) Tensed predication is neither a form of adverbial modification nor of copula modification.

The two positions part company soon, though. Firstly, although they both agree that intrinsic properties are not just superficially monadic and non-relational, they disagree on the proper subject of instantiation of intrinsic properties. According to the four-dimensionalist, temporal parts of objects instantiate temporary intrinsic properties, while according to the three-dimensionalist presentist, objects themselves instantiate intrinsic properties. Secondly, they disagree on the consequences of (TP). While the four-dimensionalist reduces tensed predication, contextually, in terms of a-temporal predication, by endorsing

(TC) ‘ x is a P ’ uttered at t , is true iff x -at- t is P a-temporally⁴,

the presentist takes tensed predication as a primitive and irreducible form of temporal predication. Her position, thus, may be summed up in the formula “ordinary objects (and not their temporal parts) just have intrinsic properties”⁵. To illustrate the idea, consider a sentence such as (1):

(1) Federico is sleepy

When (1) is true (at t , in the morning, say), Federico just has the property of being sleepy. He does not have it by having a time-indexed property, or by bearing a certain relation to a time. And he is not sleepy “morning-ly” or by bearing a temporally modified non-relational link to the property of being sleepy either. Federico just has the property of being sleepy. At a later time (at t' , in the evening, say), Federico may lack the property of being sleepy, he will – for instance – have the property of being fully awake. According to the presentist, at t and t' respectively, Federico (the “whole” Federico and not one of his temporal parts) just has different, incompatible properties.

II. Now, how can the presentist avoid the contradiction of attributing incompatible properties to the same entity, given that, in her account of persistence, the very same entity just has different, incompatible properties? Notice that the problem does not concern what the presentist says, but rather how she describes reality to be. To put it in Kit Fine’s terms: if both the tensed fact that Federico is sleepy, and the tensed fact that Federico is fully awake compose reality, then it seems like reality may encompass contradictory facts. By taking tenses as primitive the presentist will never ex-

⁴ x -at- t is the temporal part of x existing at t .

⁵ Cf. Hinchliff, 1996; Haslanger, 2003.

explicitly state a contradiction, but she will nevertheless describe a contradictory reality – one encompassing incompatible facts. Of course, those facts have different “temporal positions”, and according to the presentist not all temporal positions have the same ontological status. This is exactly how the presentist avoids the contradiction: she claims that there is only one existing temporal position, viz. the present time, and reality is composed only of facts obtaining at the present time. Therefore, when the fact that Federico is sleepy is present, it belongs to reality, and when the fact that Federico is fully awake is present, it belongs to reality, but they are never both present, and thus they never belong both to reality.

Notice that the presentist here is exploiting the metaphysical view of the A-theory of time to solve the contradiction, rather than her ontology restricted to presently existing entities. As also Haslanger has noticed, the eternalist A-theorist may endorse a similar solution to the problem of temporary intrinsics. What it takes for an A-theorist to claim that ordinary objects just have temporary intrinsic properties, without falling into a contradiction, is endorsing the view that the present time is metaphysically privileged over the past and the future, namely to endorse (F):

(F) Tensed facts that obtain at the present time are the only metaphysically privileged facts that compose reality⁶.

The presentist will construe such privilege as existence: reality is composed only of tensed facts that obtain at present. But the A-theory of time is compatible also with an eternalist ontology (namely a domain encompassing also past and future entities), and thus with the claim that the privilege of the present perspective on reality is not existence, but some primitive “spotlight” on reality. The eternalist B-theorist shares the same ontology, but maintains that reality is composed of tenseless facts, and thus there is no metaphysical privilege of the present time. Nevertheless, the B-theorist may endorse the semantic thesis according to which tensed sentences express tensed proposition – i.e., taking tense seriously. As Dean Zimmerman has lately stressed, the distinction between a serious tensor B-theorist and an eternalist A-theorist is difficult to pin down. According to Zimmerman, the two theorists disagree on the following tenet:

(TH) There are tensed propositions that are true (false) simpliciter.

⁶ This is the thesis Kit Fine calls *factive* presentism, which is compatible with *ontological* eternalism, namely the view that past and future objects have the same ontological status than present ones (Fine, 2006).

If he is right, then the A-theorist needs not to insist on (F) to make sense of her solution to the problem of temporary intrinsics. The A-theorist (whether presentist or not) can define ‘just having’ along those lines:

(JH) A (three-dimensional) object x just has the property being-P if and only if the tensed proposition expressed by an utterance of ‘ x is P’ is true *simpliciter*⁷.

By adopting this definition the A-theorist will both have the means to solve the problem of temporary intrinsics, and distinguish her position from that of the B-theorist serious tensor. Two birds with a stone!

However, in order for (JH) to do both jobs, we need to secure a grasp of the notion of truth *simpliciter* as applied to tensed propositions that is independent from our grasp of (F). Claiming the contrary would have us caught in an impasse. On the one hand, it would be circular to draw the distinction between the serious tensor and the A-theorist as a disagreement on (TH), and then understand truth *simpliciter* as applied to tensed proposition in terms of (F), which is the thesis we are individuating the A-theory with. On the other hand, we have good reasons to think that the core notion involved in the A-theory of time, the idea that the passage of time is real, does not imply (F). Fine’s fragmentalist version of tense realism, for instance, is meant to be a non-standard form of A-theory, which explicitly rejects (F). According to the fragmentalist, reality is not a single coherent collection of tensed facts. There are different collections of tensed facts, namely different fragments of reality (for instance, each perspective from a particular time is such a fragment), but no collection of fragments, in turn, compose reality. If also this position qualifies as a form of A-theory, then grasping truth *simpliciter* as applied to tensed proposition in terms of (P) would not allow us to characterize what all forms of A-theory share. In the rest of the paper I will show that this independent grasp is an illusion. It might seem that we grasp this notion only if we blur certain distinctions concerning propositional evaluation and truth.

III. I start with noticing that if the disagreement between the B-theorist serious tensor and the A-theorist is a disagreement on (TH), then defining true *simpliciter* as true at the present time will not do the job. The only reason a philosopher has not to take reference to the present time as an arbitrary choice of what counts as true *simpliciter* is that she believes (F) to

⁷ Where the predicate ‘P’ express the property of *being-P*, ‘ x ’ refers to x , and the ‘is’ is that of *tensed* predication.

be true – or something in the ballpark. A better try is to insist on the evaluation of tensed propositions. What distinguishes the A-theorist from the merely serious tensor is that, according to the former but not the latter, tensed propositions are evaluated simpliciter, viz. without any reference – neither in tensed, nor in tenseless terms – to a time or a temporal location. This seems to be what Zimmerman has in mind when he claims that:

What is being ruled out [by the A-theorist, as opposed to the B-theorist serious tensor] is the need for further ‘completion’ of properties like loudness or bentness in order for a thing to exemplify the property; in particular, nothing like a time needs be ‘added’ to the property and the thing in order to make the proposition that the thing has the property ‘complete’. But what is this notion of ‘completion’ if it is not simply: ‘complete enough to be true in a non-relative fashion’? (Zimmerman, 2005, p. 447)

The expression ‘complete enough to be true in a non-relative fashion’ seems to imply that the complete proposition in question is evaluated simpliciter, and not with respect to a temporal parameter. Now, it seems to me that the idea that it is possible to evaluate a tensed proposition without reference to a temporal location is based on a confusion. To be sure, according to the standard A-theorist, there is only one privileged time of evaluation. But it does not follow from this that evaluation of tensed propositions is carried out without reference to any time whatsoever. It is still relative to the only privileged time (i.e., the present time) that tensed propositions are true or false. The only cases in which it makes sense – *prima facie* at least – to evaluate a tensed proposition without reference to a certain time are non-temporary (and thus degenerative) cases: for instance if a sortal property is involved (e.g., if the tensed proposition expressed by an utterance of ‘This is a banana’ is true with respect to a time t , it is true with respect to any time, and thus it is true simpliciter), or an eternal object is involved (e.g., ‘Number two is even’). But tensed propositions concerning contingent objects and temporary properties cannot be evaluated without reference to a time, and thus cannot be true or false simpliciter. Unless by this we mean simply that they are true with respect to the present time, and the present time is the only metaphysically privileged time. But by so doing we will not secure to truth simpliciter as applied to tensed propositions an independent grasp, and we would anyway let non-standard forms of A-theory out of the picture.

I know that the A-theorist – the standard A-theorist at least – will resist such line of thought and claim that I am misconstruing her position. In her picture, whether the ascription of the tensed property being presently sleepy to a persistent object such as Federico, i.e., the tensed proposition

that Federico is presently sleepy, is true or not, it is a matter of how reality is, full stop, and not a matter of how reality is relative to a certain parameter, namely a temporal location. Still, the tense realist's reality – at least the non-presentist tense realist's reality – does not contain only present facts, but also past and future facts. Here we have to be careful, since the expression 'present fact' is ambiguous: it may mean present tensed facts (such as the fact that Federico is fully awake, as opposed to the fact that Federico was sleepy), or it may mean tensed facts obtaining at present (such as the fact that Federico is fully awake, and the fact that Federico was sleepy, which obtain at present, as opposed to the fact that Federico is sleepy and the fact that Federico will be fully awake, which obtained this morning). The eternalist A-theorist puts a privilege of some sort over present facts in this second sense, and not only on facts that are present in both senses. Reality, for the eternalist A-theorist encompasses the whole plethora of tensed facts composing the perspective from the present time, no matter where in time they are located.

Some presentists are willing to say that even when we talk about the past and the future we are actually talking about present properties of the world⁸. But this position has its costs⁹, and those costs are usually among the main reasons that push an A-theorist towards eternalism and away from presentism¹⁰. Roughly, the A-theorist endorses eternalism in order to have all the tensed truth makers it takes to ground not only present tensed truths, but also past and future tensed truths. The eternalist A-theorist is not compelled to avoid any reference to the past and the future in construing the past and future tensed facts that ground past and future truths. In her picture, the past tensed fact that Federico was sleepy obtains at present if and only if the present tensed fact that Federico is sleepy obtained in the past. And it is the latter present tensed fact, which obtained in the past, what makes true now that Federico was sleepy. If she could not refer to a past time to localize in the past the truth-maker of a past tensed truth, then the eternalist A-theorist would not be better off than the presentist in her account of truth. Thus, the truth makers for past and future tensed sentences have different temporal location within the perspective from the present, and the A-theorist needs to "target" those different positions in order to evaluate the tensed proposition expressed by tensed sentences.

⁸ E.g., Bigelow, 1996.

⁹ For criticisms cf. Sider, 2001, and Keller, 2004.

¹⁰ Or to endorse an Ersatz version of presentism (Crisp, 2007; Bourne, 2006) for which what I say in the next paragraphs may be applied, *mutatis mutandis*.

More precisely, the A-theorist evaluates with respect to the present time a past tensed proposition [Pp] (to be read: it was the case that p) by evaluating with respect to past times the present tense “kernel” [p] of the proposition. Thus, maybe, in a trivial sense, present tensed sentences are evaluated simpliciter, because they do not need further reference to a position in time within the present perspective, but past and future tensed sentences need always reference to past and future time within the perspective of the present time in order to be evaluated.

IV. The conclusion is that if the A-theorist wants to resort to all the truth makers that an eternalist ontology allows her to have, she cannot make sense of a notion of evaluation simpliciter of tensed propositions, and thus, she cannot make sense of a notion of truth simpliciter, as applied to tensed propositions. Again, if with ‘truth simpliciter’ here she means nothing over and above that reality is composed only by the facts that obtain at the present time (or at any rate that those are the only metaphysically privileged facts of reality), and thus being presently true is being true simpliciter, then her position is intelligible. But, then, there is no independent grasp of the notion of truth simpliciter as applied to tensed proposition. This seems right, also in light of non-standard forms of A-theory: by rejecting the privilege of the present, the non-standard A-theorist reject the idea that tensed propositions may be true simpliciter, but this does not seem to amount to a rejection of her metaphysical view of time. What distinguishes the eternalist A-theorist position from that of the serious tensor B-theorist is, rather, the nature of the truth makers involved in the interpretation and evaluation of tensed sentences. The A-theorist will have tensed proposition made true by tensed facts. The tensed proposition expressed by ‘Federico is sleepy’ uttered at t , the present time, is true if and only if the fact that Federico is (presently) sleepy presently obtains. The serious tensor B-theorist will have tensed propositions made true by tenseless facts. The tensed proposition expressed by ‘Federico is sleepy’ uttered at t , is true if and only if the fact that Federico is sleepy at t obtains simpliciter. The idea of a tensed proposition true simpliciter, when disjoined from the idea of some sort of privilege over the present time is but a monster that no serious ontology should flirt with.

Giuliano Torrenzo
 Dipartimento di Filosofia
 Università di Torino
 Via Sant'Ottavio 20
 10121 Torino, Italia
 giuliano.torrenzo@labont.it

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