

Zimmerman on Presentism

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1 ZIMMERMAN'S STRATEGY

Two Questions:

- (1) Are there objective differences between what is past, present, and future?
- (2) Are present events and things somehow more “real” than those wholly in the past or future?

Zimmerman answers Yes to both. He thinks that these answers are ‘obvious and commonsensical’, so that if we show that there are no clear objections to these answers then we should accept them.

2 VERSIONS OF THE A-THEORY

Remember: The **A-theory** is the view that there are objective differences between past, present and future. Another way of putting it is that it is the view that the present is metaphysically special (Zimmerman uses the word ‘privileged’ instead of special).

Zimmerman defends Presentism.

Presentism Only present things (including objects, times, events etc.) exist

But there are other versions of the A-theory, e.g. Growing Block, Moving Spotlight. Zimmerman rejects these versions because he thinks they don’t adequately deal with the ‘thank goodness that’s over’ objection and also because they lead to skepticism about whether we are present. (We will think about this second objection next week.)

A possible response to the ‘thank goodness that’s over’ objection: Can we explain the relief we feel by noticing that we can’t change the past and that evolution has trained us not to worry about things we can’t change?

3 THE TRUTHMAKER OBJECTION TO PRESENTISM

The basic idea is for a sentence (or proposition) to be true there must be something in the world that explains/grounds/makes the sentence (or proposition) true.

Take a true sentence about the past: George Washington crossed the Delaware on December 25th 1776. It appears, for the presentist, that there is no object or event in the world that makes that sentence true. The sentence lacks truthmakers.

Zimmerman's response: Postulate new basic facts or properties and say those are the truthmakers.

This seems *ad hoc* or unsatisfying but Zimmerman challenges us to say why.

4 THE SPECIAL RELATIVITY OBJECTION TO PRESENTISM

The central objection (this is basically Zimmerman's 'second objection):

Special Relativity does not recognise one privileged notion of 'simultaneity'. Two events, A and B, occur at the same time with respect to one reference frame and occur at different times with respect to another reference frame. (Where a reference frame is basically a specification of how fast and in what direction something is moving.) No reference frame is privileged over any other.

But then the problem for presentism is that it says that all of the events *simultaneous with now* exist. But if there is no privileged notion of 'simultaneity' then what does this mean?

The response: Although fundamental physics doesn't say that any reference frame is privileged we still can. After all, fundamental physics doesn't talk about tables but they exist.

Is this satisfying? Are those cases analogous? Are we saying that special relativity is incomplete if we think there is a privileged frame? Are we saying it is incomplete by saying there are tables? Would picking a privileged reference frame be arbitrary in a bad way?

5 WHY BELIEVE THE A-THEORY?

Zimmerman claim it is part of commonsense. Smart thinks the commonsense belief is a mistake. At each time we naturally are especially concerned about that time – but that doesn't mean that the time is metaphysically special.

Of course there are some parts of commonsense that we now think are false. But Zimmerman claims that if something is a part of commonsense that counts strongly in it's favor. He claims that not doing so would lead us to be skeptical of many things.

But there are other factors that come into choosing what theory to believe apart from commonsense, e.g. the simplicity of the theory, its elegance, explanatory power, how it fits with science, whether it is *ad hoc* etc.. Do these favor B-theory?