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Why is Presentism Intuitive?

Abstract – Presentism is, roughly, the ontological view that only the present exists. Among philosophers engaged in the metaphysics of time there is wide agreement that presentism is intuitive (or commonsensical) and that its intuitiveness counts as evidence in its favour. My contribution has two purposes: first, defending the view that presentism is indeed intuitive from some recent criticisms; second, putting forth a genealogical (or debunking) argument to the effect that presentism's intuitiveness is deprived of the evidential value commonly granted to it.

1. Introduction

In philosophical discourse we often come across claims that such and such view is more intuitive – or, on the contrary, more counterintuitive – to the folk, i.e., to non-experts about the matter at hand, than some other views. In a similar vein, it is often claimed that such and such view is more in line – or more in contrast – with common sense than some others. (In this paper I shall mostly talk in terms of intuitiveness and counterintuitiveness, but I take these notions to be largely interchangeable, in this context, with those of alignment and contrast with common sense, i.e., commonsensicality and paradoxicality.) Sometimes such references to the intuitiveness, or counterintuitiveness, of certain philosophical views may be mainly rhetorical (see Sommers 2010: 205). But in other cases, though not always explicitly or with much emphasis, they are meant to play an epistemically more substantial role: the intuitiveness of a view is adduced as (defeasible) evidence in its favour, while the counterintuitiveness of a view as (defeasible) evidence in its disfavour.

This also happens in temporal ontology, the debate over the ontic (or existential) status of non-present (temporal) entities, i.e., past and future ones. Here we find three main rival views: presentism, pastism, and eternalism. According to presentism, the past and the future do not exist, for only the present exists; according to pastism (or growing block theory), the past exists, along with the present, whereas the future does not; according to eternalism, both the past and the future exist just like the present. Temporal ontology is tightly interwoven with other debates on the nature of time, and primarily with the debate on the reality of temporal passage: presentism and pastism are forms of the dynamic view of time, while eternalism comes in dynamic as well as in static forms. Among authors

engaged in temporal ontology there is an almost universal agreement that presentism is more intuitive than rival theories; and there seems to be also a quite large agreement, among presentists and non-presentists alike, that this counts as evidence in favour of presentism or is at least a reason to take presentism as an option deserving careful critical scrutiny (Ingram & Tallant 2022: §2).

No doubt, careful critical scrutiny is something presentism has attained and presentists are in fact very busy answering the many objections raised against their theory, especially those concerning the grounding of past truths, cross-temporal relations (in particular, causal ones), and relativistic physics.¹ Lately, however, the very appeal to intuitiveness in support of presentism has come under attack. Torrenco (2017) argues that presentism's alleged intuitive appeal is just a myth that vanishes when one takes a more careful look at the content of common sense: certain common-sense beliefs concerning the ties between existence and time turn out to be neutral so far as temporal ontology is concerned, while others even appear to favour non-presentism over presentism. But doubts on presentism's intuitiveness have been raised also based on studies carried out in experimental philosophy. Latham et al. (2021), relying on the results of two questionnaire-based experiments (conducted over substantial samples of U.S. residents), suggest that the common-sense view of time might well be incomplete or indetermined under various respects, including the ontic status of the non-present. Again, this appears to count against the received view that presentism is intuitive.

In this paper I shall also attack the presentist appeal to intuitiveness; however, I shall go a different route than the mentioned authors. While endorsing the view that presentism is intuitive and granting that its intuitiveness should (initially) be considered as evidence in its favour, I shall put forth a genealogical (or debunking) argument against the presentist appeal to intuitiveness. I shall argue that the intuitiveness of presentism can be deprived of its evidential value by explaining how presentism would be intuitive even if our world were not as presentists depict it. The explanation of the intuitiveness of presentism – which is, at the same time, an explanation of the counterintuitiveness of non-presentism – will be built around three basic elements: first, the role of (sensory) perception in the formation of common-sense ontic beliefs (i.e., those about the existence and nonexistence of entities of certain types); second, the temporal confinement of our perception to what is (approximately) present; third, a principle of simplicity governing the activities of our cognitive system. In a nutshell: with few exceptions, we only perceive what is (approximately) present and our cognitive system is strongly inclined towards the simplest ontological interpretation that is compatible with our perceptual experience, namely the presentist one: this is why presentism is intuitive (and therefore part of common sense). Being explained in this manner, presentism's intuitiveness is shown *not* to be explained by the

¹ For an overview of the debate over presentism, see Ingram & Tallant (2022).

(putative) fact that the universe is as presentism pictures it, and this deprives presentism’s intuitiveness as well as non-presentism’s counterintuitiveness of their epistemic value.

My contribution has a limitation in scope that, before proceeding, must be pointed out. Some authors have already tried – some of them successfully, in my opinion – to explain away some common-sense beliefs, or folk intuitions, that are part of presentism *qua* form of the dynamic view, namely the beliefs that time passes and that the present is both objective and spatially extended across the whole universe (references in §4). My genealogical reconstruction of presentism’s intuitiveness will disregard these aspects of presentism and be concerned exclusively with the ontological component of it, which has not been addressed yet (at least, not in the way I shall do).

What you are about to read is divided in the following way: §2 briefly formulates the central issue and the main views in temporal ontology; §3 gives a concise characterisation of intuitiveness and commonsensicality, and their ties; shows why deeming intuitiveness to be endowed with evidential value; argues in favour of the received view that presentism is indeed intuitive, addressing one objection raised by Torrenco (2017) and the doubts put forth by Latham et al. (2021); §4 details the genealogical argument against the presentist appeal to intuitiveness; §6 takes into account the only component of the propounded explanation of presentism’s intuitiveness which might at first glance be suspected of being in turn explainable by the (putative) fact that the universe is a presentist one, namely the temporal confinement of perception, and shows that it is not so explainable; §7 summarises and draws the conclusions.

2. Presentism and other views in temporal ontology

The core issue of temporal ontology is whether past and future entities exist – more precisely, *tenselessly* exist.² The adverb “tenselessly” – but “simpliciter” is often used with the same, or a close, meaning – signals that the predicate to which it is applied is construed as expressing a tenseless attribute ascription, i.e., one lacking tense: that bit of temporal information determining whether the instantiation of the attribute is past, present, or future. So, by claiming “snow is tenselessly white” we leave undetermined whether the instantiation of whiteness is past, present, or future. The same goes with existential ascription (see Hestevold & Carter 2002, Ludlow 2004, Mason 2006, Mozersky 2011, Sider 2006,

² As is well-known, properly characterising temporal ontology has turned out to be a tricky enterprise since various authors (including Callender 2000 and 2012, Dorato 2006, Savitt 2006, Lombard 2010) began to hold that the formulations of the various options in temporal ontology are ambiguous and, once disambiguated, become either obviously true or obviously false, and thus in any case philosophically trivial. Framing the views in temporal ontology using tenseless language is by no means the only attempt to deal with the triviality issue; however, it is the most popular (see references given in the body text) and the one I favour.

Torrenco 2012), albeit with the complication that such ascription may be taken to express a higher-order property instantiation and thus to be better analysed in quantificational terms, in which case the metalanguage of the quantifiers must be tenseless too (see Graziani & Orilia 2021).³ So, presentism is the view that the past and the future do not tenselessly exist, for only the present tenselessly exists; pastism is the view that the past tenselessly exists, along with the present, whereas the future does not tenselessly exist; eternalism is the view that both the past and the future tenselessly exist just like the present. Having clarified that, I shall use the adverb “tenselessly” only when necessary to avoid misunderstanding.

Temporal ontology is tightly intertwined with other debates in the philosophy of time, first and foremost the one about whether time has a dynamic nature. According to the dynamic view of time, or A-theory, there is a metaphysically significant feature – call it *A-theoretical presence* – that differentiates what is present from what is not. Depending on the specific form of dynamic theory, this difference may be ontic, qualitative, or positional in character. According to presentism, the present differs from both the past and the future by being in existence; according to pastism, the present differs from the future by being in existence and from the past by being the “temporal surface” of the existent, hence only positionally; according to A-theoretical eternalism (or moving spotlight theory), past, present, and future differ from each other qualitatively, namely by instantiating (irreducible) A-properties: pastness, presentness, and futurity. What is A-theoretically present changes, i.e., time passes: the A-theoretical presence is a “moving” presence, for it is possessed by all times, and the entities located at those times, but in a mutually exclusive way (if one time is present, all the others are not). The passage of time takes different forms depending on the nature of A-theoretical presence: on presentism, it is the coming into existence and going out of existence of temporal entities; on pastism, it consists in the coming into existence happening at the surface of the existent and in the accumulation of the existent in the past, which grows (temporally) longer as new things come into existence; on A-theoretical eternalism, it consists in the subsequent instantiation of A-properties by temporal entities. The dynamic theory of time is usually held in conjunction with a further tenet about the nature of the present: the present (the total sum of what is A-theoretically present) is both universal, i.e., spatially extended across the whole universe, and objective, hence, from the physical viewpoint, independent from the frame of reference. As is well known, this notion of the present is (at least apparently) in tension with modern physics, especially with Special Relativity, and although some dynamists have tried to resolve this tension by devising a new notion of present more fitting to relativistic physics, most have preferred to stick to the old notion, motivating their choice in various ways (e.g., by insisting that Special Relativity does not

³ Tenseless existential predication is often said to express “tenseless existence”. Properly speaking, however, tenselessness is not a mode, or a feature, of existence, but just a way of *ascribing* existence (or any other attribute).

exclude the reality of an objective universal present, but only its empirical detectability, or by espousing a Neo-Lorentzian interpretation of Special relativity).⁴

The static (or non-dynamic) view of time denies the two central tenets of the dynamic view: that there is a feature of the universe such as A-theoretical presence, which differentiates in a metaphysically significant way what is present from what is not, and that time passes. On the static view, the only legitimate notion of (temporal) presence is a relative one, namely, to be present as *being simultaneous with a time*; and this presence is possessed by all times (as each is simultaneous with itself), and the things located at them, but not in mutually exclusive way (all times are jointly present in relative sense). Since the present does not differ in any metaphysically significant way from the non-present, it does not differ ontically either; hence, the static view implicates eternalism. The static view takes various forms, among which the one by far most popular is the B-theory, so much that it is usually referred to as *the* static theory of time. On the B-theory, being past and being future just amount to bear the B-relations of precedence and succession to a given present: being past is to be earlier than the present, being future is to be later than the present. However, since everything is present relatively to itself, there are infinitely many relative presents, and correspondingly infinitely many relative pasts and futures. On the B-theory, the present (each relative present) is usually taken to be, strictly speaking, spatially unextended and the B-relational order of events only obtaining among events that are separated by a time-like spatiotemporal interval from each other. In effect, most B-theorists are willing to conform their view to modern physics, in particular by including in it the constraints (at least apparently) imposed by special relativity. Besides the B-theory, the static view of time takes two further forms, which however have very few supporters: the C-theory, according to which times are only ordered by the C-relation of temporal betweenness; and the Timeless theory, according to which times, despite appearances to the contrary, bear no temporal relation to each other.⁵

3. Presentism's intuitiveness

⁴ For a critical overview of the main strategies carried out to address compatibility issues between the A-theory and relativistic physics, see Eagle 2021.

⁵ Prominent elaborations and defences of presentism, pastism, A-eternalism, and B-eternalism can be found, respectively, in Bourne 2006, Tooley 1997, Schlesinger 1980, and Mellor 1998. The C-theory is explained and defended in Farr 2020; the Timeless theory in Barbour 1999. For further references in temporal ontology, see Markosian 2020: §§ 5 and 6.

Claims that the dynamic view is intuitive (more than the static view) abound; and claims that presentism is intuitive (more than its rival options in temporal ontology) also abound.⁶ It seems, thus, that we may rank the options in temporal ontology described in §2 by their level of intuitiveness (according to philosophers) in the following way: presentism is at the top and is followed, in this order, by pastism, A-theoretical eternalism, and B-theoretical eternalism.

Talk about the intuitiveness or commonsensicality of such and such view in temporal ontology, as in many other areas of philosophy, usually relies on quite broad acceptations of the two locutions. “Intuitiveness” refers to the property, which can be had by a proposition (or other truth-bearers, such as a sentence or a belief) of *being true-seeming*, i.e., *appearing to be true* to a cognitive subject; correspondingly, “counterintuitiveness” to the property of *being false-seeming*, i.e., *appearing to be false* to a cognitive subject. “Commonsensicality” means belonging to common sense, where “common sense” refers, to put it very briefly, to the folk view of the world; or, in little more detail, to a system of propositions, often rather superficial and vague, concerning general aspects of reality, believed by a very large quote of humanity (presumably the majority of it) from different places and different times, without any special effort and any specialistic formation, often tacitly and even unconsciously. While there is obviously a lot more that could be said about intuitiveness and commonsensicality, for the purposes of this paper we just need to say something about how they are tied together and why they might be appreciated epistemically.

Surely, many propositions belonging to common sense are intuitive to *many* people, and this fact represents a main explanation of why they are indeed so widely believed (and therefore part of common sense). In other words, certain propositions belong to common sense because many people find them intuitive. But intuitiveness is also what matters the most, from the epistemic point of view, when a proposition is claimed by some philosopher to be commonsensical. The fact that a proposition is intuitive, i.e., appears to be true, can be taken as a (defeasible) evidence that it is indeed true; correspondingly, the fact that a proposition is counterintuitive, i.e., that it appears to be false can be taken as a (defeasible) evidence that it is indeed false (see Rescher 2005: 31, and Zimmerman 2008: 222). In many cases, if a proposition seems true to you, this is already for you a good reason to take it to be true; but even more so if the proposition at hand is intuitive to many subjects besides you, especially if they differ under important respects such as age, social belonging, and culture (for the presence of such differences decrease the likelihood that the sensed intuitiveness might be just an idiosyncrasy of some individual or restricted group). And it is reasonable to think that the more people

⁶ See, for example, presentists such as Bigelow (1996: 35), Hinchliff (1996: 131), Craig (2000: 8), Markosian (2004: 48), De Clercq (2006: 386), Kierland & Monton (2007: 485), Merricks (2007: 140); Orilia (2016), Zimmerman (2011: 226); but see also non-presentists such as Putnam (1967: 240); Sider (2001: 11), Wüthrich (2012: 441), Petkov (2007: 207).

sense a certain proposition as intuitive, the stronger is the evidence in favour of that proposition, and this why common-sense propositions are rightly held in high regard.

There is, then, some actual epistemic value to presentism's intuitiveness. Of course, the evidence in favour of a view provided by its own intuitiveness can be defeated by opposing reasons; so, one may well judge that presentism, despite being intuitive, should be rejected as false because of its many difficulties. Most philosophers of time think are in fact of this opinion. However, a more radical possibility is in principle open to a detractor of a (putatively) intuitive philosophical view: putting into question the very assumption that it is intuitive. Admittedly, the agreement on the intuitiveness of presentism is close to be unanimous, but not fully so. Some authors, such as Zimmerman (2008: 221) and Dainton (2010: 228), while granting that the common-sense view of time is indeed dynamic, are more hesitant as far as temporal ontology is concerned.⁷ But others, such as Torrenco (2017) and Latham et al. (2021), rather than simply hesitant, are explicitly critical of the view that presentism is intuitive and hold that there are reasons to reject it.

Torrenco (2017) picks out the following claim as one expressing a common-sense belief about the connection between existence and time:

(1) "What existed (and exists no more) is not what we meet in the present" (2017: 52).

As it stands, Torrenco argues, (1) does not express a distinctively presentist intuition and must be acknowledged as true by anyone regardless of their stance in temporal ontology: things that existed and exist no more are wholly past and thus not present; then, of course, they are not what we meet in the present. To defend the view of presentism's intuitiveness based on (1), one needs to construe the existential talk in it in terms of existence *simpliciter*. Thus construed, (1) turns into:

(2) "What existed doesn't exist *simpliciter*" (2017: 53),

which is in effect a distinctively presentist claim, i.e., one that a non-presentist could not accept as true. But it is quite doubtful, according to Torrenco, that (2) represents the "most straightforward reading" (2017: 55) of (1), for we may well ask "why an intuition about what does no longer exists in the present has [...] anything to do with an intuition about what exists *simpliciter*?" (2017: 53). So, we must acknowledge that (1) is neutral as far the ontic status of the past is concerned and the attempt to give it a presentist bent is manifestly artificial.⁸

⁷ However, Zimmerman in the work mentioned in fn. 6 subscribes to the received view of presentism's intuitiveness.

⁸ As mentioned in §1, Torrenco (2017) also argues that there are other common-sense beliefs that appear to even favour non-presentism over presentism (in particular, the beliefs that the present causally depends on the past and that the past is

I totally agree that (1), as it stand, is neutral among competing options in temporal ontology, and that (2) is not a legitimate interpretation of (1). However, I do not think that this gives us any reason to doubt the view of presentism's intuitiveness: I think that *both* (1) and (2) express intuitions that are part of common sense. Torrenco seems to assume that presentism's intuitiveness can only be argued for, or is best argued for, by showing that some ordinary (tensed) claims about existence and time, such as (1), are best construed, or just legitimately construable, in terms of existence simpliciter (which involves a tenseless ascription of existence), as done in (2) – at least, this is the only argumentative approach Torrenco takes into account. But supporters of presentism's intuitiveness are not compelled to argue in this way: they may simply claim that presentism, or (2) for that matter, should be considered intuitive because most philosophers agree it is so (I shall come back to this line of reasoning later in this section). So, they have no need to force an artificially presentist construal upon common-sense beliefs that are genuinely neutral. The fact that the definition of presentism, or (2), makes use of a kind of predication – the tenseless one – that is arguably extraneous to ordinary language is not problematic, for it is plausible that some common-sense beliefs are not just tacit but only find their adequate expression in a philosophically revised language. For example, the belief that there exist no timeless entities presumably qualifies as commonsensical but is not adequately expressible without employing tenseless language. I think the same happens with presentism.

The other attack to the view that presentism is intuitive comes from experimental philosophy. Latham et al. (2021) conducted two experiments over large samples (over 500 people in each experiment) of U.S. residents, in which participants were shown six vignettes respectively describing the six theories of time presented in §2 and then asked to judge which vignette described a universe that is most like our universe.⁹ The two experiments, jointly considered, found that ~70% of participants time (66,3% in the first experiment, 72,8% in the second one) share a view of time which is more similar to some form of the dynamic view of (presentism, pastism, or A-eternalism); while ~30% of participants (33,7% in the first experiment, 27,2% in the second one) one more similar to some form of the static view of time (B-theory, C-theory, or Timeless theory). However, the researchers also found that, surprisingly, none of the six specific theories presented earned a very large majority of the preferences. The percentages of preferences attained by the various options in the first experiment are: A-eternalism 14,5%, presentism 17,4%, pastism 34,3 %, B-theory 17,2%, C-theory 9,3%, timeless theory 7,3%; those attained in the second experiment are: A-eternalism 24%, presentism 24,6%, pastism 24,3 %, B-theory

not abstract). I do not address this further criticism as my genealogical argument is only concerned with the intuitiveness of presentism, aside from possible tensions between presentism itself and other common-sense beliefs.

⁹ In the second experiment the researchers also aimed at individuating the naïve theory of time, i.e., the one people hold naturally, apart from cultural influences.

12,9%, C-theory 7,2%, timeless theory 7,2%. According to the authors, these empirical findings corroborate the opinion that the common-sense view of time is indeed dynamic (though the detected level of consensus is perhaps lower than many philosophers assume), but they weaken claims that any of the six specific theories taken into account might qualify as part of the common-sense view of time. More specifically, since the percentage of preference attained by each of the six theories varies across the two experiments, it is plausible that “participant’s responses are principally sensitive to the presence of dynamic, or non-dynamic features, rather than to the specific kind of dynamic or non-dynamic features” (2021: ...) and, thus, that “rather than there being at least six fairly complete and determinate theories of time [...], instead, there are two theories of time in that population, one dynamic and non-dynamic, and that these theories are incomplete, or indeterminate, in various respects” (2021: ...).

But what about the ontological respect in particular? If we focus on that, we may notice that the percentage of those who chose the eternalist option (in one form or another) remains indeed quite stable across the two experiments: 49,3% in the first experiment, 51.3% in the second. Now, although support by ~50% of participants is presumably still not enough to recognise eternalism as part of the common-sense view of time, it suggests that common sense might be not completely neutral about the ontic status of the non-present. So, Latham et al. (2021) seem to give us some reasons not only to doubt that presentism is the common-sense view in temporal ontology, but also to think that while no ontological option may qualify as such, it is eternalism the one which surprisingly comes closest to do so.

I think, however, that we should not be in a hurry to draw such conclusions. Questionnaires in experimental philosophy must aim at a balance between conflicting needs: intelligibility for participants, faithfulness to the actual philosophical views, and concision. Such balance is quite difficult to reach in certain cases and my impression is that Latham et al. (2021)’s questionnaire is indeed too much on the side of faithfulness to the actual philosophical views, sacrificing intelligibility to non-experts and concision. It seems to me that, while being a crystal-clear summary in the eyes of experts, the description of the various theories results, for most *non-experts*, quite long and complex, hence quite cognitively demanding – and, I dare to add, *too* cognitively demanding to be properly understood and filled in with attention in a timespan of approximately 20 minutes, which, as indicated by the authors in §§3.1.1 and 3.2.1, is the timespan needed to participate in the study (although it is not specified whether it represents a previous esteem or the average time actually employed by participants). I think, therefore, that there is a concrete possibility that the absence of a neat (and stable across the two experiments) preference by participants for any of the six specific theories of time might have been owed not so much to the indeterminateness, or incompleteness, of their view of time (and of the common-sense view of time), but rather to a partial lack of comprehension of the vignettes they were presented with: the vignettes mangled quite well to make comprehensible dynamic and non-dynamic

aspects of the various theories, but less well other aspects, possibly including the ontic status of the non-present.

Besides these general concerns about length and complexity, I believe there to be a more specific shortcoming in the formulation of the vignettes that may have compromised, more specifically, the intelligibility of the ontological differences among the various theories. I too am involved in the activity of surveying folk beliefs about time, and I have come to realise, especially through the pre-testing of questionnaires, that it really takes a lot of effort to have non-experts in temporal ontology understand the relevant sense in which past and future things are said to exist or not to exist. The researcher must contain a very strong tendency in many non-experts to construe claims that past or future things exist, or do not exist, in a metaphorical way, namely in terms of (I) claims involving a sense of “exist” that is not the intended one (for example: *once existed, presently exist, exist sooner or later, are fixed and cannot be changed, exist in the mind, exist qua memory, have practical or emotive relevance for present human activities*); or (II) claims concerning not past or future things but instead *present* things which are connected, in one way or another, to past or future things (for example: causes, effects, remains, traces, memories, intentions, emotions, plans). So, presented with the question *do past things exist?*, many non-experts answer in the affirmative; however, what they usually mean is that past objects once existed or that they presently exist *qua* memories, effects, emotions – which, however, is clearly not what temporal ontology is (primarily) about and is compatible with the claim that past things do not exist in the relevant sense (i.e., tenselessly). Analogous misunderstandings very easily happen when questioning non-experts about their beliefs about the existence of future things. Now, it seems to me that Latham et al. (2021) did not put sufficient effort in their questionnaire in order to avoid such highly probable misunderstandings, and I think this compromises the validity of their study. To conclude, I do not believe that Latham et al. (2021) provide any effective reason to doubt the view that presentism is part of common sense.

A more reliable determination of common-sense contents about the ontic status of the non-present would be doubtlessly beneficial to temporal ontology; and to this end, further empirical studies, specifically focused on the beliefs at issue, need to be carried out. In the meanwhile, however, we would do well to stick to the received view that presentism is part of common sense, and the main reason to do so remains the very widely shared opinion, among philosophers, that it is. I think that philosophers are still in the best position to judge about this matter, and that for two complementary reasons. On the one hand, philosophers’ statements about what is, or is not, intuitive (or commonsensical) are not based on wild guess. Just like non-philosophers, philosophers do themselves have common-sense beliefs, and even if they happen to replace some of them with paradoxical ones, they presumably do not forget what they once believed if it was of remarkable philosophical interest; moreover, I believe that it is no infrequent experience for many philosophers to have conversations on

philosophical subjects with curious non-philosophers. On the other hand, philosophers do usually understand the philosophical views they are interested in and therefore introspection about their own prephilosophical beliefs is to be considered virtually immune from misunderstanding; moreover, having a conversation is generally much less exposed to misunderstanding than filling out a questionnaire especially when dealing with subjects which are particularly hard to make accessible to non-experts – as it is, I believe, temporal ontology. It is thus reasonable to believe that philosophers have indeed some knowledge of what some non-philosophers believe about certain philosophical topics; and the fact that there is some wide, albeit not unanimous, agreement that a certain view is intuitive should be given great weight. For this reason, I think, it is still safe to assume that presentism is indeed intuitive.

4. Presentism's intuitiveness explained

The epistemic valorisation of intuitiveness expressed in the previous section relies on a presupposition which was omitted there but at this point has to be highlighted for it is essential to the genealogical reasoning pursued in this section. It is the following: the intuitiveness of a proposition counts as evidence of the (putative) truth of that proposition only if that very intuitiveness is explained by the (putative) facts the proposition is about (although we may not know much or anything at all about this explanatory connection). In our case, those who assign evidential value to presentism's intuitiveness must presuppose that the sensed intuitiveness is explained by the (putative) fact that the world is as presentism takes it to be. Now, this presupposition has a noteworthy consequence: by showing that the intuitiveness of a proposition is explained not by the (putative) facts it is about but by other facts having nothing to do with its subject matter deprives its intuitiveness of the evidential value formerly granted to it (see Korman 2019).

Such genealogical, or debunking, kind of reasoning has already found rather wide and, I think, partly successful application to A-theoretical beliefs regarding the nature of time, in particular the beliefs that time passes (see for example Paul 2010, Prosser 2012, Braddon-Mitchell 2013, Hoerl 2014, and Deng 2017) and that there is an objective and universal present (see Butterfield 1984 and Callender 2008). As a consequence, there is a significant reduction of the evidential value which may be legitimately granted to the intuitiveness of the A-theory of time – a reduction which, of course, also concerns presentism inasmuch as it is a form of the A-theory. The argument I am about to expound takes this genealogical line of reasoning a step forward by targeting specifically the ontic component of presentism.

Human perception is temporally limited in a very evident way: at each time (from a given place), we can only perceive a very thin amount of what it is *ever* possible to perceive (from that place). For example, in my room I cannot now see what happened here three days ago or what will happen in three

days (see Le Poidevin 2007: 84 and 2019: §7). We may call this aspect of our perception *temporal confinement (of perception)*. Naïvely, one is inclined to think that human perception is such that, at each time, we only perceive the present, i.e., what is located at that time, and thus that the past and the future are not perceived. This is the *naïve view of temporal confinement*: human perception is temporally confined to the present. Of course, this view is partially incorrect: surely enough, we do not perceive the future; however, what we do perceive is the past, not the present. And that for the simple reason that perception takes time, for the speeds with which light waves and sound waves propagate are finite, and so are the speeds with which nervous impulses are transmitted through the nerves and with which the brain elaborates the information conveyed by those impulses to form a percept. As a consequence, our perception is always lagging behind the external world: it is always the past, not the present, to be perceived. While strictly speaking (partly) incorrect, the naïve view of temporal confinement is nevertheless a good approximation. With few exceptions (e.g., when we look at a starry night or hear the thunder produced by a lightning), in everyday life we found ourselves perceiving objects that are relatively close to the place where we are. Moreover, the propagation of information by light and sound from the perceived object-states and the elaboration of that information by the brain happens at speeds that are very high compared to those at which, usually, everyday macroscopic objects in our environment change. So, the time lag involved in our perception is usually very small (just about half a second in the case of sight) and any object-state we perceive usually turns out to be very similar to the state (of that same object) existing after the time lag (see Callender 2008: 348). In brief, even if we perceive only the past, this is usually a very recent one and thus we may say that that we usually perceive the *approximately present*.

There is no doubt that perception plays a fundamental role in the formation of many common-sense beliefs and in bestowing intuitiveness on them. My purpose is to show that perception – or, better, the lack thereof involved in temporal confinement – also explains why presentism originates and is intuitive.

Let us begin by making an obvious – but, as we shall see, not irrelevant – point: perceiving something typically enhances the chance that we come to believe that that something exists and find it intuitive that it exists. We might say that, typically, *perceiving Φ_s* is a *promotes* (the formation of and the possession of intuitiveness by) the corresponding *affirmative* ontic belief *that Φ_s exist*. E.g., we come to believe, and we find intuitive, that there exist things such as cats (also) because we have seen cats many times. Moreover, and even more obviously, *not perceiving Φ_s* , typically, does *not* constitute *promote* (the formation of and the possession of intuitiveness by) the corresponding *affirmative* ontic belief that Φ_s exists. E.g., the fact that we do not see nine-legged cats fails to produce in us the belief that there exist nine-legged cats and fails to make such belief intuitive. I think that, however trivial they might be, these remarks concerning the ways perception and the lack of it influence the formation of ontic beliefs play

a relevant role in explaining what is *not intuitive* and what is *not counterintuitive* in temporal ontology. As said earlier, our perceptual experience of the world, at each time, is usually confined to a very recent past. It is plausible, however, that most people in their everyday interactions with the world – including, presumably, scientifically educated people in their less reflective moments – are in fact under the guidance of the *naïve* view of temporal confinement (i.e., that we do only perceive what is present). If we now consider that, typically, not perceiving something fails to promote the corresponding affirmative ontic belief, it is plausible to think that temporal confinement (naïvely construed) fails to promote the belief that the past and the future exist: our perceptual experience, being temporally confined to (what we naïvely take to be) the present, does not incline us towards non-presentism. I suggest that this explains why non-presentism is *not intuitive* – and therefore *not commonsensical* – and why, vice-versa, presentism is *not counterintuitive* – and therefore *not paradoxical*.

Of course, it remains to be explained why presentism is *intuitive* – and therefore *commonsensical* – and non-presentism is *counterintuitive* – and therefore *paradoxical*. *Not perceiving Φ_s* , while typically not promoting the *affirmative* ontic belief that *Φ_s do exist*, is typically not *sufficient*, in and of itself, to produce, and make intuitive, the *negative* belief that *Φ_s do not exist*. This is testified by our everyday experience on many occasions: for example, someone may be currently not seeing their dog, but this does not mean that they are going to believe, and find intuitive, that their dog does not exist anymore. Similarly, I think, someone's presently not perceiving their yesterday evening's pizza is not enough for them to come to believe that that pizza does not (tenselessly) exist (located at a past time). In general, I think that temporal confinement (naïvely construed), in and of itself, does not suffice to explain why the belief that past and future things do not (tenselessly) exist is intuitive and, correspondingly, why the belief that they do is counterintuitive. To explain the intuitiveness of presentism, and the counterintuitiveness of non-presentism, a further ingredient needs to be added to the reasoning and put to work along with temporal confinement.¹⁰

Cognitive science has abundantly shown that perception and cognitive activities of different kinds (such as categorisation, concept learning, memory, and causal reasoning) comply with a principle of simplicity. Our perceptual and cognitive systems typically operate by preferring the simplest interpretation of available information or, more precisely, by tempering a bias towards simplicity of the interpretation of available information with a requirement of consistency with that information (see Feldman 2016). It is realistic to suppose that this principle is also active in the formation of naïve metaphysical beliefs, including those concerning the ontic status of the non-present. With this

¹⁰ Someone might not be convinced by the pizza example and have the impression that presently not perceiving yesterday evening's pizza might be fully sufficient to come to believe, and find intuitive, that that pizza does not (tenselessly) exist (located at a past time). I think (assuming my proposal is correct) that this impression is presumably due to the fact that the further ingredient I am about to introduce usually operates without subject's awareness.

supposition, we can explain the intuitiveness of presentism: since, at every time, we only perceive (what we naïvely take to be) the present and since our cognitive system favours the simplest ontological interpretation that is compatible with our way of perceiving the world, we naturally come to believe, and find intuitive, that the present is all that there exists. Presentism is in fact simpler than the other options in temporal ontology in a very evident way: it is much more quantitatively parsimonious, for it admits of the existence of far fewer entities compared to pastism and still fewer compared to eternalism.¹¹ In brief, presentism is the simplest option in temporal ontology by which our cognitive system metaphysically construes the temporal confinement of perception: this is why presentism is intuitive, and thus part of common sense; and this is why, correspondingly, non-presentism is counterintuitive, and thus in contrast with common sense.¹²

In this genealogical reconstruction of presentism's intuitiveness, the principle of simplicity plays an essential role. While stressing that, we must not understate the role played by temporal confinement, and specifically by a feature of it which might be called *rigidity*: temporal confinement is something that does not change and over which we have no control whatsoever. The principle of simplicity was required precisely because, as said, not perceiving something does not seem to be sufficient to the production of the corresponding *negative* ontic belief that that something does not exist. In fact, in many cases not perceiving something is no obstacle to the formation, and preservation, of a corresponding *affirmative* ontic belief. But why is it so? In certain cases, this might be owed (in part at least) to the fact that the specific lack of perception at issue *is not rigid*: it is a reversible condition and one which we have control over, i.e., we are able to remedy our lack of perception of a certain thing and restarting perceiving it. Let us consider some familiar examples. (I) We can cease to see a material object because it is momentarily occluded by some obstacle (e.g., when a car passes behind a wall); however, this is normally not enough to come to believe that the object, while occluded, does not exist. (II) Our vision is spatially confined to our visual field: outside of it, we do not see anything; however, this is not enough to come to believe that there does not exist anything outside of it. (III) When an object moves away from us, it appears increasingly smaller and indeterminate in our eyes, until it finally disappears; however, we do not think that that object has then ceased to exist. (IV) While sleeping in our bedroom,

¹¹ Of course, I mean presentism in its naïve version, not in the philosophically expert ones, which are usually at least as ontologically expensive as non-presentism, for in order to account for the meaning and truth of discourse about the past, they usually posit the existence of abstract entities of various kinds (e.g., haecceities, ex-concrete individuals, propositions, tensed facts) as replacements for past ones (concrete times, objects, or events).

¹² Of course, this does not imply that people are aware of the various options in temporal ontology and operate a thoughtful evaluation of them by which they end up endorsing presentism. Many basic cognitive activities occur without subject's awareness, and the same must happen with those underlying the formation of naïve beliefs about the ontic status of the non-present.

we do not see the objects around us; however, when we wake up, we do not come to believe that during the night they have ceased to exist, to start over existing just in time for our awakening. So, our ordinary experience shows us that an object that is, at a certain time, not seen because covered by another, out of our visual field, too far, or subtracted to our alert perception, can in principle be perceived again at some subsequent time (by removing the obstacle, turning our head towards it, getting closer to it, or getting awake). In all four cases, the principle of simplicity is of course still in force; however, the fact that the lack of perception involved in them is not a rigid condition dissuades our cognitive system from taking a momentary condition of non-existence as the simplest interpretation of a momentarily not being seen. But the lack of perception involved in the temporal confinement of perception is not like those in the examples mentioned; it is *rigid* in character: it is not a changeable condition and one under our control. And this rigidity, I think, is essential to the effect that presentism might appear to the cognitive system the simplest option compatible with temporal confinement.

A corollary of the line of reasoning pursued in this genealogy of presentism's intuitiveness is that, probably, if there were no temporal confinement at all or if it were not as rigid as it in fact is, presentism would not be intuitive and perhaps, in virtue of the nexus between perception and *affirmative* ontic beliefs, some other ontological view would. Let us imagine to be able to perceive the *whole past* or *the whole future* (or both), just like we can see various spatial regions to the left and to the right in our visual field. In such a scenario, time could be perceived as analogous to space: perhaps we would perceive reality as of a four-dimensional block, a bit as when we look at a chronophotograph. Alternatively, we may try to imagine to be able to perceive at will some specific *temporally restricted portion* of the past or future, a bit as if we were equipped with a sort of "temporal telescope" allowing us to observe, from the present, different portions of the past or the future. The two imaginary perceptual scenarios could be described in more detail, but the little I have said should be enough to give an idea of how a different way of perception – with no temporal confinement or with a different temporal confinement – might have rendered presentism counterintuitive, and non-presentism intuitive.

So, the explanation of presentism's intuitiveness does not lie in the (putative) fact that the world is a presentist one, but rather in certain aspects of our perception and cognition; and none of these aspects appears to be in turn explainable in terms of the (putative) fact that the world is a presentist one. Since the obtaining of an explanatory tie between presentism's intuitiveness and the (putative) fact that the world is presentist is required in order for presentism's intuitiveness to possess evidential value, showing that there is no such tie deprives presentism's intuitiveness of evidential value.

Admittedly, one component of the propounded explanation of presentism's intuitiveness might at first glance raise suspicion: temporal confinement, of course. We must then address the question of whether presentism might be adduced as an explanation, possibly the best one, of this aspect of our

perception. In the next section we shall see why we must answer in the negative. (Those who are already convinced that presentism has no explanatory power in this connection may skip §5 and jump directly to §6.)

5. The temporal confinement of perception explained

So, how do we explain temporal confinement? To keep things simple, we may focus on a single mode of perception, generalisation to others being quite simple. Let us choose sight, for it is presumably the most important and informative sense for humans. Then, the question is: why do we at any time only see, of every object we are seeing, the object-state we are actually seeing and not earlier or later object-states as well?

Most part of the answer is simply a prosecution of those remarks motivating the replacement of the naïve view of temporal confinement with the physically appropriate one. Information coming from the object-state seen needs some time to travel (conveyed by light waves) across space outside my body and reach my sensory organs, and still other time to travel (conveyed by electrical impulses) through my nervous system up to my brain, and finally to be elaborated and transformed, by my brain, into a percept. I cannot see *later* object-states (than the one I am currently seeing) because information coming from them reaches *too late* the place where my brain is to produce a corresponding percept at this moment (it can only produce a percept after this moment). Moreover, as far as future object-states are concerned (object-states that are after this moment), there is also a further obstacle, namely the direction of causation. Perception is a causal process in which the object-state perceived is the initial cause and the formation of a corresponding percept in our brain, or mind, the final effect. Le Poidevin (2007: 85) remarks that since effects are later than their causes, my current percept cannot be caused by a later object state – this is an additional reason why we cannot perceive the future (seeing the future would require backwards causation and it is not obvious that it is something actual or, even it is, something which may be involved in perception). I cannot see *earlier* object-states (than the one I am currently seeing) because information originating from them reaches my brain *too early* to produce a corresponding percept at this moment: it can only have produced a percept before this moment. But why, we might then ask with Le Poidevin (2007: 86), an object-state that has already been seen cannot be seen any longer or more than once? Plausibly, it is so because of a combination of two different factors: one is, again, merely physical; the other is evolutionary. After a bit of information coming from an object-state has been recorded by my eyes, it is no more available to exert a prolonged, or repeated, proximal stimulation on them, for light waves conveying that bit of information have travelled further away. Moreover, the very percept of an object-state, once it has formed, does not remain present to our consciousness for a long time, nor, once it has gone, does it come back again (but of course we can

have a corresponding memory). To see why it is so, we may turn to evolutionary considerations made by Le Poidevin (2007: 86). Like other animals, to survive within their environment, humans need to act efficaciously, and to do that they need to have a representation of their environment that is accurate enough, which means, since the environment changes, an updated one. Since the storage capacity of our information-processing systems is limited, we are not able to simultaneously elaborate conflicting information (i.e., information pertaining to different object-states) in an efficacious way. So, if we were not able to stop perceiving what we have already perceived, we would perceive different states of the objects in our environment (for example, we would simultaneously perceive a predator, or a pray, as located at different places), and as a consequence we might not be able to readily react to events happening in our environment which are relevant for our survival. It is thus plausible to think that there has been an evolutionary push in favour of our not perceiving for too long, or repeatedly, what we have perceived.

So, the question “why do we at each time only see the object-state we are actually perceiving?” has a rather composite (physical, causal, and evolutionary) but solid answer: the physical and causal parts are fairly uncontroversial; the evolutionary part is more conjectural, but nevertheless quite plausible. By generalising this answer to other senses, we attain a full explanation of temporal confinement. This feature of our perception, then, is explained by aspects of our world having nothing to do with the (putative) fact the world is presentist: if the past or the future existed (more precisely: if it were the case that the past or the future tenselessly exist), we would not perceive them anyway.

6. Summary and conclusion

Most philosophers engaged in temporal ontology believe that presentism is intuitive, i.e., appears to be true, to most people (and is part of common sense); and many of them also grant that presentism’s intuitiveness represents a (defeasible) evidence in favour of its truth. Other philosophers, however, have argued, based on conceptual reasons or empirical findings, that we should abandon the received view that presentism is intuitive. In this paper I have replied that we should instead stick to the received view, but I have also put forth a genealogical argument to the effect that presentism’s intuitiveness is deprived of the evidential value usually granted to it: the fact that presentism is intuitive is explained by the fact that presentism is the simplest option about the ontic status of the non-present that is compatible with the temporal confinement of human perception to the (approximately) present – and thus not by the (putative) fact that the world is as presentism pictures it. Unveiling the absence of an explanatory connection between the intuitiveness of presentism and the (putative) fact that the world is a presentist one deprives presentism’s intuitiveness of its evidential value.

Along with this consequence on the epistemic level, there is a non-negligible consequence on the psychological level too. In some cases, when we are rationally compelled to abandon an intuitive view and perhaps replace it with a counterintuitive one, the former may still preserve its intuitiveness and the latter its counterintuitiveness – a situation which for some may involve a sense of dissatisfaction. In this regard, genealogical arguments may come to the aid: showing that the intuitiveness – or counterintuitiveness – of such and such philosophical view has nothing to do with the (putative) fact that the world is – or is not – in the way that view portrays it may help soothing that sense of dissatisfaction. So, the genealogical argument expounded in this paper may offer some relief to non-presentists who are still lured by presentism’s intuitiveness or unsettled by non-presentism’s counterintuitiveness.

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