Presentism: Past and Future

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# 0. Introduction

Let us begin with a quick primer on views in the philosophy of time. Consider an event that is *past*, such as Constantine being acclaimed Emperor at Eboracum, an event that is *present*, such as your reading of this paper, and an event that is *future*, such as humans establishing an outpost on Mars. Setting aside concerns about whether there exist events (in addition to, e.g., objects), philosophers of time disagree in several ways about the events under consideration. Some disagree about whether all three events exist. This is (part of) the dispute between *presentists*, *eternalists*, and *no-futurists*. Further, some disagree about whether the events begin to exist or cease to exist. This is the dispute between *transientists* and *permanentists*. Finally, some disagree about whether events are absolutely or objectively present, rather than merely subjectively present or present only as a matter of perspective. This is (part of) the dispute between *A theorists* and *B theorists*.

This is not an exhaustive list, to be sure, nor is it intended as a comprehensive overview of the state of the art, but the disputes mentioned mark clear fault lines in contemporary philosophy of time. Our focus in this paper is presentism. In slogan form: “only present objects exist”. It is a view associated frequently with both transientism and the A theory (see, e.g., Zimmerman 2008, Deasy 2017).[[1]](#footnote-1)

Our aims here are threefold. First, we will say more about presentism. So far, we have sketched some background disputes and introduced it with a slogan. There is much more to be said. Second, we will step back a little to consider the question that presentism is supposed to answer. That is, if ‘only present objects exist’ (or some appropriate precisification of the slogan) is the answer to a philosophical question, then (i) what is the question? And (ii) is it the right question to ask? We will suggest that the question (or questions) presentists are answering is not a good one to ask. This leads us naturally to our third aim: to articulate a question that presentists, or the heirs of presentism, should try to answer. In pursuing these aims, we provide the reader with a sense of how we have reached the current position in the literature, as well as how we might move it along.

# 1. What is Presentism?

Presentism is sometimes characterised as the view that only present objects exist and that what is present really changes as time passes (see Ingram & Tallant 2018, Ingram 2019: 11–38).[[2]](#footnote-2) We begin with a qualification that ‘*sometimes*’ presentism is understood this way because not all self-described presentists accept the characterisation (see Tallant & Ingram 2020). However, as it is a standard (mainstream) characterisation of the view, and one that many would recognise and accept as presentism, it suffices for our purpose and we take it as our starting point.

So understood, presentism is an *ontological* thesis—a thesis about what exists (i.e., only present objects exist). However, presentism is often also described as a *dynamic* thesis (i.e., what is present—the sum total of what exists, given the ontic thesis—really changes from moment to moment) (see, e.g., Miller 2013: 346). In what follows, we discuss each thesis in turn.

1.1. Presentism and Ontology

Presentism says that there are no non-present objects. Hence, presentism implies, e.g., that Emperor Constantine does not exist. Presentists can accept that Constantine *has existed* (past tense), but he does not exist *now* (present tense) and, therefore, he does not exist *at all*, as per their ontological scruples. Also, presentism implies, e.g., that human outposts on Mars do not exist either. Once again, presentists can accept that Mars outposts *will exist* (future tense), but they will insist that such merely future objects do not exist *at all*, given presentism. So understood, presentism is a claim about what exists, absolutely and unrestrictedly (see, e.g., Markosian 2004: 47–48).

In the temporal ontology debate, presentism competes with *eternalism* (slogan: “past, present, and future objects exist”) and *no-futurism* (“only past and present objects exist”). Each is a distinct, substantive view about what exists.

At first pass, the disagreement concerns the existence of non-present objects, since all agree that present objects exist; all accept that if some object *x* exists now, then *x* exists. Presentists disagree with eternalists and no-futurists about *wholly past objects*. Eternalists and no-futurists accept that if *x* has existed (and *x* is not present), then *x* exists; presentists demur. For instance, according to eternalism and no-futurism, the Great Library of Alexandria exists. Furthermore, presentists and no-futurists disagree with eternalists about *merely future objects*. Eternalists accept that if *x* will exist (and *x* is not present), then *x* exists; presentists and no-futurists demur. For instance, according to eternalism, the first child to be born in the 24th century exists. Hence, we have a trio of positions in temporal ontology; three views that disagree about the extent of our ontological commitments (to non-present objects).[[3]](#footnote-3)

In a similar vein, another standard way to introduce presentism is (via the modal-temporal analogy) with the claim that presentism is the temporal analogue of *actualism*, the modal thesis that ‘everything is actual’ or that ‘only actual objects exist’, and that eternalism is the analogue of *possibilism*, the thesis that ‘non-actual objects exist’ (see Sider 1999: 325–6). Possibilists believe that there exist merely possible objects (*possibilia*)—objects that do not *exist actually*, but *could have existed*, e.g., talking donkeys, flying horses, etc.—whereas actualists deny that there exist any such objects. So, put simply, just as actualists and possibilists disagree about non-actual objects, presentists and eternalists disagree about non-present objects—objects that do not *exist presently*, but *have existed* or *will exist*. By comparing presentism to actualism and eternalism, we can get a better sense of the nature of the presentist doctrine.

Although presentists and non-presentists disagree about the existence of non-present objects, some suggest that there is a deeper disagreement between them. Trenton Merricks asserts that ‘presentism and eternalism differ most fundamentally with respect to the nature of time and, relatedly, with respect to what it is to exist at a time’ (2007: 120).

Understanding this more fundamental difference helps us to understand presentism better. Recall that presentists and non-presentists agree that present objects exist. Merricks notes that one could be forgiven for thinking that this signals a further agreement about the present itself, i.e., both accept that the present time exists and agree about its nature (2007: 123). But there is (or should be) no such further agreement. Indeed, this is the locus of the deep disagreement between presentists and the rest (says Merricks). Presentists and non-presentists do not agree about the nature of the present time, nor do they agree about what it is to exist at the present (2007: 123). As Merricks has it: ‘their differences with respect to the nature of, and existence at, the present time are as important as their differences with respect to the past and the future’ (2007: 123). Presentists do not accept an eternalist conception of the present, as something like a thin slice of being, nor do they accept the eternalist (and no-futurist) idea that to exist is to be located at some time (2007: 124).[[4]](#footnote-4)

1.2. Presentism and Dynamism: Two Distinctions

As well as being an ontological thesis (the thesis that only present objects exist), presentism says that what is present—i.e., what exists, absolutely and unrestrictedly—really changes as time passes, from one moment to the next (see Miller 2013: 346; Leininger 2015: 726; Ingram 2019: 20–23). Put differently, presentism is understood as a *dynamic theory of time*.[[5]](#footnote-5)

At the outset, we said that presentism is associated with two other views in the philosophy of time: *transientism* and the *A theory*. Both can be understood as attempts to capture the sense in which reality is dynamic, or how what is present changes. In what follows, we explain each in turn as a part of presentism.

The term ‘A theory’ comes to us via McTaggart’s infamous argument for the unreality of time. Put simply, time is unreal because time requires real change, but there cannot be real change without the reality of an A series of events, and the A series is inherently contradictory (see McTaggart 1908, 1927: §§ 305–332). An A series is the series of events ordered with respect to whether they are future, present, or past. Crucially, McTaggart thought that the reality of time is dependent on the existence of this series of events. Hence, an A theory is just a theory that marks a genuine metaphysical distinction between the properties of *being future*, *being present*, and *being past* (i.e., the determinations that constitute the A series). And, importantly, these properties of reality are *objective* rather than merely subjective, according to the A theory.

To get a feel for what the objective/subjective distinction might come to here, consider the intuitively subjective term ‘here’. To say that an object or event is *here* is to say nothing more than that it is located at the same point as the utterance. There is no distinctive property of *hereness* that objects have and in virtue of which they may be said to be *here*. All that matters to *hereness* is that the utterance and its subject coincide spatially. If we were to say that ‘now’ is similarly subjective, then saying that an event in time is *now* would be to say nothing more than that the utterance and its subject (some event) coincide temporally. And, to be clear, this is not the A theorist’s thesis. Nor is it the presentist’s thesis, for that matter. ‘Now’ does not *merely* mark that an utterance and an event coincide; it marks something more metaphysically significant—though what it marks *exactly* will depend upon which dynamic theory of time we consider. For presentism, though, it is clear enough that ‘now’ does not *merely* mark a temporal coincidence. According to presentism, all that there is to existence *is* the now (in a sense). The past and the future do not exist, though it is *now* the case that some events *have existed* (or have been present) and others *will exist* (or will be present).

By contrast, the term ‘transientism’ (and the related ‘temporaryism’) comes to us from more recent sources (see Sullivan 2012, Williamson 2013, Deasy 2015, 2017, 2019). Transientism is the view that *sometimes something begins to exist, and sometimes something ceases to exist*. Transientism entails temporaryism, the view that *sometimes something is, sometimes nothing*. Presentists accept transientism. According to presentism, objects that once did not exist (e.g., the authors) come into existence (become present) and, at some moment in the future, they will go out of existence (cease to be present). Transientism (and presentism) can be contrasted with permanentism, the view that *always everything always exists*. Permanentism says that nothing ever comes into existence, and nothing ever goes out of existence. Eternalists accept permanentism and reject transientism. (If past, present, and future objects all exist, then nothing ever goes out of existence.)

Recently, the fact that presentists accept transientism and reject permanentism has been used by some to try to precisify the debate between presentists and non-presentists (see, e.g., Deasy 2017, 2019, Cameron 2016). Very roughly, the idea is that the distinction between transientism and permanentism can be used to capture the core of what is at issue between presentists and their opponents. For instance, presentists think that everything comes into existence and goes out of existence; no-futurists (growing block theorists) think that everything comes into existence but that nothing goes out of existence (since both past and present objects exist); and eternalists think that nothing ever comes into or goes out of existence. Hence, the presentism-eternalism debate is recast as a debate between A-theoretic transientists (the presentists) and B-theoretic permanentists (the eternalists).

So much for the current literature. We appear to have two ways of thinking about presentism. First, it is an ontological thesis: the view that only present objects exist. Second, it is a dynamic thesis: the view that, e.g., objects come into and go out of existence. Though the two ways of thinking about presentism have some commonalities, they are also strikingly different—at least in terms of their presentation. The former but not the latter involves *presentness*. The latter but not the former involves *temporary existence*.

We now want to step back a little and consider these two ways of thinking about presentism. In a perfectly trivial sense, any theory can be understood as an answer to some question. For instance, the theory of gravitation can be considered as the answer to the question of why massive bodies attract one another; tectonic plate theory can be considered as the answer to the questions of why earthquakes occur and why land masses are located where they are with the contents that they have. We could go on.

So, we might ask: what questions are ‘only present objects exist’ and ‘some objects come into existence, and some go out of existence’ intended to answer? We think that this is an interesting way to frame the extant debates because it reveals certain oddities about the ways in which we have been proceeding to date in the philosophy of time. We begin by considering what we take to be the obvious questions to which these views are given as answers. Then, we explain why these would not be good questions to ask (or, if they are, why the answers given turn out to be odd as answers to *these* questions). Finally, we consider what we take to be better questions and explore some potential answers that have already—if only tentatively—found their way into the literature.

# 2. Questions and Answers

Let us begin again with the slogan: ‘only present objects exist’. At its core, this thesis appears *ontological*—that is, it appears to be an answer to a question about *what exists*. We are told that present objects exist, but wholly past objects and merely future objects do not exist at all. Hence, ‘only present objects exist’ is construed naturally as an answer to the question: ‘When, in time, do objects exist?’ Or, more simply: ‘What exists *in time*?’

The first point to note about this question is that it appears to be essentially *locative*. That is, the question calls for an answer that specifies a location (in time) at which all objects exist. This gives us one reason to worry about the question. As should be apparent, locative questions are not questions that philosophy is well-equipped to answer (although, of course, this is not to say that philosophy can say nothing about the nature and structure of locations, see e.g. Parsons 2007, *inter alia*). Broadly speaking, philosophy as a mode of inquiry, does not give us the tools to explore where or when objects are located. For instance, suppose that one were to ask: ‘Where is the table?’ Philosophical reasoning appears unlikely to generate an answer this question. No philosophical method (a priori reflection, conceptual analysis, ameliorative analysis, deduction, induction, etc.) looks like to help to determine where any given table is located. What we need to do, to determine where the table is, is to look, and looking is not obviously a philosophical activity (at least, not one of any great sophistication). Indeed, we cannot think of any philosophical thesis—other than certain views in the philosophy of time and change—that are sensibly viewed as answers to locative questions.

We concede, of course, that perfectly reasonable philosophical theses have implications for the answers to locative questions. To give one example: the identity theory of mind can be taken as an answer to the question: ‘What are mental states?’ Answer: mental states are (identical with) brain states (see Smart 1959). But this implies that mental states are located wherever there are brain states and, straightforwardly, that there are mental states located in a conscious person’s head. This consequence—that some philosophical views have implications for the location of objects, events, etc.—is something that we return to later when exploring our preferred questions (and answers). Our point for the time being is simply that philosophical questions do not seem to be ones that ask where things are located. Rather, as in the case of the identity theory, philosophical questions ask about the nature or kind of thing that some entity is, and we accept that answers to these questions can have locative implications.

This suggests that we might do better to view ‘only present objects exist’ as the answer to a different, *kind*-based question: ‘Of what *temporal-kind* are existing objects?’ And, for obvious reasons, we think that this is a better question to ask. It is a distinctively philosophical question about kinds.

Nonetheless, we think that there are still challenges facing us if we pursue issues in the philosophy of time through this question. For instance, if the view under consideration is that there are no non-present objects, then we are faced with a question: why? Suppose that there are times (and that times are not objects). Either there exist non-present times or not. If there were non-present *times*, but no non-present *objects*, this would call for explanation. There would be non-present times at which the non-present objects could exist (could be located), after all. Given the sheer number of times out there, it would be a bizarre cosmic consequence! However, if the view is that there are no non-present times *at all* (and no non-present objects, no non-present events, etc.), then this looks like it might collapse into the thesis that the only kind of existence is present existence (or presence). It is not merely the view that there are no non-present objects. On this view, there is nothing at all other than what is present. Though we think that something like this view has much to recommend it, we will pause for a moment and return to this issue later (in §3).

So, the tempting thought is this: unless we take ‘only present objects exist’ to be an answer to a question about temporal kinds, we are left with the locative question—a question that is not obviously philosophical and one that philosophy is not well-suited to answer. That being so, we turn our attention now to the second thesis introduced as part of presentism: *transientism*. To what might this be an answer? Is the question a good one?

In particular, we turn to the A-theoretic transientism that some (e.g., Deasy 2017, 2019) argue *is* presentism. That is:

‘There is an absolute, objective present instant… & sometimes, something begins to exist and sometimes, something ceases to exist’ (2017: 391)

Deasy asserts clearly that he takes transientism to answer two questions: ‘Do things begin to exist?’ and ‘Do things cease to exist?’ (2017: 390). In fact, Deasy argues that different answers to these two questions offer a way to recast the debate between presentists and their opponents: presentists answer ‘yes’ to both questions, eternalists answer ‘no’ to both, and no-futurists answer ‘yes’ to the first and ‘no’ to the second (2017: 390–2).

However, as has been noted in the literature (e.g., Tallant 2019), A-theoretic transientism fails to capture presentism, as the view is understood normally, because there are countermodels that satisfy Deasy’s characterisation, but which are very different from the kinds of views that are usually described as versions of presentism. For ease of exposition, since we will refer to it again later in the paper, it is worth introducing one of the countermodels now: *the ‘trundling block’*. Here is the case:

‘For the first 1000 years of the trundling block world it appears exactly as would a growing block world [i.e., a no-futurist world]. There is a steady accretion of events, adding to the block. However, after having existed for 1000 years in the body of this growing block, events cease to exist. 1000 years of existing is all that events do within the body of the block; then their time is up, and they cease to be. For the first 1000 years of its life, this scenario appears to be a growing block world. After 1000 years, though, the block stays the same ‘size’, carrying on gaining new events, but now losing them, too. The block ceases growing and starts trundling through time, shedding events as it goes. So much for the gloss, now let me be more formal. This is a world where: there is an absolute, objective present instant and sometimes, something begins to exist, and when it does so it is objectively present. It then continues to exist for 1000 years, then it ceases to exist.’ (2019: 412–3)

Tallant uses this case to argue as follows: A-theoretic transientism is true at a trundling block world—there is an absolute, objective present, and things begin to exist and cease to exist (after 1,000 years)—but this world is *not* a presentist world. Therefore, A-theoretic transientism is not presentism (2019: 413).

This is not our main point, though we will return to it. Our immediate concern is with Deasy’s questions. Although they are useful with respect to developing a taxonomy, they do not seem to help in guiding philosophical inquiry. As things stand, Deasy’s questions ask us whether or not objects are added to our ontological inventories and, subsequently, are removed from them. To be sure, whether our ontologies vary in this way is an interesting question, but (again) there are few parallels with other philosophical questions. Deasy’s two questions ask whether or not some phenomena occur. The closest analogues we find in the wider literature concern issues such as composition and the mereological structure of ordinary objects. These debates—rather than asking about the kind or nature of some class of entity--focus instead on whether that class of object (composite objects) exist. At least, as we will show, this is *superficially* the case.

For instance, we might ask: ‘Does composition occur?’ and ‘Are some objects proper parts of other objects?’ As guiding philosophical questions, these are not entirely useful for the *prima facie* answers are ‘yes’—a ‘no’ answer to either would seem to follow only in the face of the failure of certain theories. To unpack that claim a little more, let us focus on the case involving composition. Start with the basic observation that it appears that there are composite objects; this paper is being written on laptops, which appear to be composites, the laptops rest on tables, which also appear to be composites, and so on. If we flat-footedly ask whether there exist any composite objects, then the answer seems to be ‘yes’.

Of course, there are those who deny that this is so. This is philosophy. For any theory *x*, there are those who deny *x*. In this case, mereological nihilists will deny that there are composite objects (see, e.g., Thunder 2017, 2021). But note that the guiding question that gets us to this result is not simply: ‘Are there composite objects?’ Rather, the question that leads us down this path in contemporary metaphysics is van Inwagen’s special composition question (SCQ) that asks: ‘When does composition occur?’ or ‘In what circumstances do things add up to or compose something?’ (van Inwagen 1990: 31).

Now, we do not think that the SCQ is necessarily a great question in and of itself. And a little bit of digging into the secondary literature will reveal why. We think that Spencer (2021) has it right when he re-interprets the SCQ (following Markosian 1998) as: ‘For any xs whatsoever, what are the metaphysically necessary and jointly sufficient conditions *in virtue of* which there is a y such that those xs compose y?’ (2021: 4375, our italics). As Spencer notes:

‘This formulation may not be canonical in letter, but I think it is canonical in spirit. Let me explain. van Inwagen (1990) introduced and focused our contemporary debate around the [SCQ]. But, as those of you who are familiar with van Inwagen already know, he may just eschew ‘in virtue of” talk altogether. Certainly van Inwagen’s own official formulation of the [SCQ] deviates from the formulation above in that it lacks any explicit demand for explanatory conditions; his official formulation asks only for the individually necessary and jointly sufficient conditions under which composition occurs (30­–31). Hence, insofar as van Inwagen has shaped our canon, the formulation above is not canonical in letter. However, even though van Inwagen’s official formulation lacks any explanatory demands, his discussion of the question does seem to make some such demands. After all, van Inwagen admits that some answers to the [SCQ] are not among “the best or most informative or most interesting” answers (47). It seems clear to me that any answer that is among the best or most informative or most interesting is one that meets certain explanatory demands.’ (2021: 4376)

We agree with Spencer. Merely asking *when* composition occurs is not interesting. It does not shine a light on the structure of reality; it does not help us carve nature at its joints (other metaphors are available.) And, as Spencer points out, it does not really seem to be the question that the literature is invested in answering. We also agree with Spencer that asking for some explanation of *why* composition occurs *is* interesting and does help us further metaphysical inquiry. (And we think that it is plausible that the reason for the widespread rejection of answers like Markosian’s (1998) ‘brutal’ answer—that it is simply a brute fact that composition occurs in particular cases—reflects the fact that what we are seeking here is a substantive, satisfying answer to some kind of ‘*why*’-question.)

Our point with respect to Deasy’s questions will then be obvious: asking *whether* objects come into existence and go out of existence really is not all that interesting. At least, there are better questions that should guide our inquiry. And this is a lesson that we think we should try to learn in formulating the questions that drive our inquiry in the philosophy of time. We do not merely want to know *whether* objects come into existence (or go out of existence); we need to know *why*. And, pivoting back to our discussion of the countermodels to Deasy’s attempt to capture presentism: if we think that it is only objects that exist *now* that exist *full stop*—if we rule out the ‘trundling block’ as a model of reality—then we are surely presupposing some *reason* that objects do not persist in reality for any longer than they do; some *reason* that objects do not survive the passing of the present moment. And, in that case, we are not really asking ‘Do objects come into existence?’ and ‘Do objects go out of existence?’ Rather, we are asking something more like: ‘If objects come into existence and go out of existence, then *why?*’ That ‘why’-question is the one that will drive everything else, for it is the answer to the why-question that will explain *why* the objects behave as they do. If that is right, then the questions that Deasy asks are perfectly fine for taxonomic reasons, but pretty ineffectual when we try to understand the world. It is the answers to the *why*s that will drive everything else.

# 3. New Questions

In the first part of §2, we suggested that asking when in time objects exist is not a great question. Instead, we indicated that the better question is: ‘If only present objects exist, then *why* do only present objects exist?’ In the second part, we suggested that asking whether objects begin or cease to exist are not great questions either. Again, we indicated that the better question is: ‘If objects come into existence and go out of existence, then *why?*’

In this section, we bring these ideas together to try to ask more meaningful questions to drive the development of presentism. In particular, we think that two questions should be asked very generally in the philosophy of time:

[1] Why does *existence* have the temporal duration that it does?

[2] Why do objects have the (particular degree of) *permanence* that they do?

Question [1] is a slightly expanded version of the question we suggested that presentists should be interested in. To open up discussion, [1] does not ask merely whether only present objects exist, and then *why*; it asks us to think generally about any duration of existence and ask: why that duration? If, as matter of fact, only present objects exist, then why is that? Why are there no non-present objects? What is it about the structure of the world that limits existence to *that* specific temporal duration? Or, if past *and* present objects exist: why is *that*? Why are there no merely future objects? Again, what is it about the structure of the world that limits existence to *that* specific temporal duration? And so on.

Similar remarks go for [2]: it asks not just whether objects come into and go out of existence, but *why* objects have the permanence that they do. If they begin to exist, last a little while, and then cease to exist altogether, then why do they only exist for that long? Why is it that, for instance, we do not have a trundling block world, with objects lasting for 1,000 years, rather than a presentist world, with objects existing only for as long as they are present? We do not think that most traditional accounts of presentism will enable us to answer these questions very well. For the most part, presentism is simply understood as ontological thesis: only present objects exist. (And, as we introduced them, similar remarks go for eternalism and no-futurism; they are ontological theses with no attempt made to answer these distinctively metaphysical questions that we raise here.) Simply asserting that only present objects exist, does not answer either [1] or [2].

Of course, there is a good deal of variation in the camp of what gets to count as a version of presentism (see Tallant & Ingram 2020). For instance, Dean Zimmerman (2011) has articulated a version of presentism according to which a four-dimensional manifold exists, with past, present, and future times, but with objects that exist only when they are present. Again, though, we would ask the same questions of Zimmerman’s view: why do times past, present and future exist, and why do objects cease to exist once they cease being present? Shifting to this view does not help us answer either [1] or [2].

Now, as it happens, we think that there is a view in the literature that offers at least an answer to [1]. (We will return to [2] in a moment.) There are self-described presentists who claim that presentism should be understood as a thesis about the nature of *existence*, not merely a thesis about when in time objects exist. For instance, Jonathan Tallant (2014) suggests that presentists should treat their view as one according to which existence *just is* presence. In developing this position, Tallant takes his cues from Merricks’s (2007) discussion of presentism. Recall (from §1.1) that Merricks asserts that presentism and eternalism differ ‘with respect to the nature of time and, relatedly, with respect to *what it is to exist at a time*’ (2007: 120, our italics) and that ‘their differences with respect to the nature of, and existence at, the present time are as important as their differences with respect to the past and the future’ (2007: 123). According to Merricks, presentists do not accept the eternalist (and no-futurist) conception of existence, i.e., to exist is to be located at some time (2007: 124). Merricks describes the following scenario which he states is not a presentist scenario:

‘[Consider] a view that starts off with the eternalist’s picture of time and existence at a time, and then ‘shaves off’ the past and future, leaving only a thin (instantaneous?) slice called ‘the present’. This view agrees with eternalism that existing at a time—any time, past, present, or future—is like being located at a place. But, unlike eternalism, this view says that while objects exist at the present time, they exist at no other times, since there are no other times at which to be located.’ (2007: 124)

Merricks does not think that this is an appropriate way in which to describe presentism. These remarks are instructive; the distinction between presentism and eternalism must include a difference in how we understand existence. This is the backdrop from which Tallant seeks to develop his position, *existence presentism*, which is intended to allow presentists to solve various challenges posed to their view (see Tallant 2012, 2014).

We do not comment here on whether Tallant is successful in that project. But we do think that treating existence *as* presence enables us to answer [1]. After all, if existence *is* presence, then there cannot be existing non-present objects and we have an explanation of why that is the case. If what it is to exist is to be present, then there is no category of existents other than present ones.[[6]](#footnote-6) That being so, everything that exists is present. Thus, we have an explanation as to why there are no non-present objects, events, etc. and so we have an answer to [1]. The reason that existence has the temporal duration that it does—the reason that existence is limited to the present—is that existence and presence are one and the same. (To return to the discussion of the identity theory from §2, to sketch a parallel: if mental states are brain states, then the reason that one cannot have a mind that floats free of a physical body is that this would require mental states and processes to be something that they are not.)

To be clear, we do not mean to imply that no other answer to [1] is possible. That would be a gross overstatement. Nonetheless, we think that existence presentism yields an answer to [1]. Further, we think that [1] is a reasonable philosophical question; it is a question that positions in the philosophy of time should be able to answer, and we think that it is a mark in favour of existence presentism (qua version of presentism) that it is able to yield an answer.

But what of [2]? We think that existence presentism also supplies an answer to this question. By way of a reminder, [2] asks *why* objects have the (particular degree of) permanence that they do; [2] prompts us to *explain* an object’s permanence. For instance, why is it that once an object comes into existence, it does not *stay* in existence in the very state that it enters into existence? Why is (e.g.) Emperor Constantine no longer a part of reality? After all, on views like eternalism and no-futurism, Constantine is very much an existent—he simply exists in the past. So, why is it that objects do not do this, according to existence presentism? Why do wholly past objects (such as Constantine) not ‘stick around’ in the past?

We think that the answer is quite straightforward: to continue to exist (to ‘stick around’) an entity must be present. An object, event, etc. *must* be present to exist because existence *just is* presence. And, if an object must be present in order to exist, then any object that ceases to be present ceases to exist. Putting this together, objects have the permanence that they do because of the nature of existence: existence is nothing more than presence. (A parallel: if we grant that water is H2O, and we remove all of the H2O from a given glass, then no water remains.)

In sum, we think that there are two good questions that views in the philosophy of time should answer:

[1] Why does *existence* have the temporal duration that it does?

[2] Why do objects have the (particular degree of) *permanence* that they do?[[7]](#footnote-7)

We do not think that standard versions of presentism (or A-theoretic transientism) give us much to go on when it comes to answering them. We do, however, think that existence presentism is able to answer [1] and [2], and we take that to be a mark in its favour. We say little here about non-presentist views and how well they may be able to answer these questions, but we cannot resist noting that, since neither no-futurism nor eternalism make kind-claims (they are simply ontological theses that tell us when in time objects exist), neither view is obviously well-suited to answering [1] and [2].

# 4. Concluding Remarks

Asking the right questions matters a great deal. It shapes inquiry. It drives the development of new theories. We have suggested that conventional statements of presentism seem to be answers to relatively uninteresting or non-philosophical questions (i.e., locative questions). We have suggested two questions that, we think, are a far better to guide inquiry. We recommend that philosophers of time focus on answering them. In closing, we also want to note one further area where better questions may be required.

As we introduced presentism, we described it as a dynamic theory of time (in contrast to static theories of time). We are not alone in doing so; such descriptions are commonplace (see, e.g., Miller 2013, Emery *et al.* 2020). Indeed, it is usual for philosophers to advocate for dynamic theories on the grounds that they are dynamic. Nonetheless, there is a challenge that arises. Let us suppose that *existence is presence* and that there are no non-present objects. How do objects *change*? After all, we have said that the maximum temporal extent of existence is restricted simply to the present. But if an object is to change *from* one state *to* another state, then, at least on some intuitive pictures of the world, existence must be of sufficient temporal duration for that change to exist. So, we may well ask: Is that the correct picture of reality? Is the present really of that minimal temporal duration? Or is there some other way to make sense of the notion that reality is dynamic? Understanding how and why presentism (and other views) should be described as ‘dynamic’, and opposing views described as ‘static’—as well as better appreciating what this distinction is supposed to bring with it­—is something that we think will constitute an important development in the philosophy of time.

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1. In more detail: some treat presentism as the view that only present *entities* exist, or that only present *things* exist, or that only present *objects* exist. Rather than get into the metaphysics of categories, and the question of which of objects, entities, or things should be our focus, we will treat presentism as a view about objects (cf. Ingram 2019: 17–19). So far as we can tell, nothing relevant to our main points in this paper turns on the distinction. Further, what it is to be an object will not be discussed directly here. We appreciate that different ways of categorising ‘object’ (and superficially similar terms like ‘entity’ or ‘thing’) may lead to different ontologies being postulated by different philosophers. Nonetheless, navigating the details of the necessary and sufficient conditions for objecthood would take us too far away from our main theme. And, finally, though we recognise that some have defined presentism as a thesis about what *is real* (as opposed to what *exists*), we will not engage with this alternate reading here. We think that these competing accounts will face analogous problems to those we discuss below, though if we are wrong about this, then that will suggest a further route forward that we have not considered. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. To formulate the view with more precision, some add that it is *always* or *necessarily* the case (see Ingram 2019: 19–20). E.g., Thomas Crisp introduces presentism as ‘[it] is always the case that, for every *x*, *x* is present’ (2003: 215), and Ned Markosian states that it is ‘the view that, necessarily, it is always true that only present objects exist’ (2004: 47, fn. 1). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. We assume that the ontological disagreement between presentists and non-presentists is substantive. That is, presentism is a substantive (non-trivial) metaphysical thesis, and it is not the case that presentists and eternalists engage in a merely verbal disagreement (see Sider 2006). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Merricks’s point about rejecting a view of presentism that treats the present as something like a ‘thin slice of being’ perhaps warrants some unpacking. The idea to which he is objecting is that we see presentism as akin to the limiting case of a subtraction from the eternalist’s ‘block universe’. That is, suppose that we start with the eternalist’s block—constituted by past, present, and future objects, times, etc.—and then remove all non-present entities until only the present remains, we would be left with one super-thin slice of being (2007: 124). This is not presentism. (We return to this idea in §3.) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. We think that *dynamism* (real change or ‘flux’) is an interesting notion that has not been explored fully in contemporary philosophy of time (though Stephen Barker ms. offers a tantalising sketch of what a ‘*flux-first*’ theory might look like). Aside from some closing remarks, we set dynamism aside here. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. This is not to say that nothing ever changes (i.e., that change never occurs), of course. Although existence is presence on this view, nothing about this requires that change does not occur, or that by virtue of having existed, past events are somehow still present. That would be a mere confusion. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. To block one potential confusion or misunderstanding, we do not take questions of *permanence* to be the same as questions of *persistence*. Questions of persistence ask (e.g.) how one and the same object can exist across times, perhaps instantiating incompatible properties at different times (see Hawley 2001, 2020). In asking about permanence, we are asking about whether and why objects are a part of the sum total of what exists before and after they are present. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)