

Presentism, Endurance and Object-Dependence

Harold W. Noonan

Department of Philosophy

University of Nottingham

Nottingham, NG72RD, UK

Tel: +44 (0)115 951 5850 Fax: +44 (0)115 951 5840

harold.noonan@nottingham.ac.uk

Abstract

According to the presentist the present time is the only one that there is. Nevertheless, things persist. Most presentists think that things persist by enduring. Employing Jonathan Lowe's notion of identity-dependence, Tallant argues that presentism is incompatible with any notion of persistence, even endurance. This consequence of Lowe's ideas, if soundly drawn, is important. The presentist who chooses to deny persistence outright is a desperate figure. However, though Lowe's notion is a legitimate and worthwhile one, this application is faulty. The incompatibility of presentism and persistence is not part of Lowe's heritage. A positive conclusion can be drawn. A form of persistence is compatible with presentism. It is one on which persistence is defined in tensed terms using an adverbial tense operator: x persists iff x exists and existed or will exist. Unsurprisingly, so understood persistence is endurance. The commonly held view is correct.

Keywords: endurance, object-dependence, Lowe, presentism

Presentism, Endurance and Object-Dependence

According to the presentist the present time is the only one that there is (and presently existing objects are the only objects that there are – though this aspect of presentism will not figure prominently in what follows). Nevertheless, things persist. Most presentists think that things persist by enduring. Of the three prominent accounts of persistence – perdurantism, the stage-theory and endurantism – the last is generally regarded as the one which is most presentist-friendly. And there are arguments that endurantists must be presentists and that presentists must be endurantists.

Recently Tallant (2018) has employed Jonathan Lowe's notion of identity-dependence (2010) to argue that presentism is incompatible with any account of persistence, even the endurantist account. This novel argument, if sound, is important. The presentist who chooses to deny persistence is a desperate figure. As Lewis says (1986: 204), no man should deny that he has a past, or, except at the last moment of his execution, a future. Fortunately for the presentist it is not sound. Lowe's notion is a legitimate and worthwhile one but the application is faulty. The incompatibility of presentism and persistence is not part of Lowe's heritage to us (nor something he accepted). But though Tallant's argument fails it is still interesting, as we shall see. There is a positive conclusion to be drawn from the discussion. There is a definition of persistence on which persistence is compatible with presentism. It is one on which persistence is defined in tensed terms using an adverbial tense operator: x persists just in case x exists and existed or will exist. But, unsurprisingly, the persistence which is compatible with presentism is endurance. The commonly held view is correct.

I

Tallant presents his argument succinctly, as follows (2018: 2213):

In order for an object, O, to persist over time, as opposed to being an instantaneous object, O must itself be (wholly) located at more than one time. Thus, the identity of a persisting (*enduring*) object, *as* a persisting object, is identity-dependent upon its existence at multiple times. There is a function, *being an existent at times other than t*, that O must saturate to be, at t, a persisting object. Since the existence of O at t and at t* is inconsistent with presentism, so O does not persist.

As the presence of the parentheses makes clear, this is a general argument for the incompatibility of presentism and persistence, and, as a special case, for the incompatibility of presentism and endurance. But why is the existence of O at t and t* (distinct from t) inconsistent with presentism? Simply because according to presentism there is not a plurality of times, there is only a single time, the present, so no non-present times. A fortiori, nothing exists at more than one time.

Tallant's argument is easily answered. Any presentist will accept that there are past facts about presently existing objects. My cat, Snuggles, presently sitting on the mat in front of the fire, was previously dozing on the sofa (it's a hard life being a cat). Since Snuggles was on the sofa previously Snuggles previously existed. And Snuggles exists now. So Snuggles exists now and existed previously. So Snuggles is a persisting object. In general, if 'x is F' entails 'x exists' (i.e., if being F is existence-entailing), then 'x was F' entails 'x existed' and 'x will be F' entails 'x will exist'. So if the presentist accepts any truths of the form 'x was F' expressible with an existence-entailing predicate he must accept 'x existed'. This inference is trivial. And if he accepts both 'x exists' and 'x existed' he must accept that x is a persisting thing. The presentist either has an account of how there can be past facts about presently existing things expressible with existence-entailing predicates or he has not. If he has not, so much the worse for presentism. If he has, by the trivial reasoning above this account is

adequate to explain persistence. So Tallant's argument cannot be used against him. Hence Tallant's argument is either unnecessary or ineffective.

This is a short response to Tallant and it might be thought by a reader of his paper to be too short since, as is evident from the passage quoted, I have ignored a central theme of his discussion.

In fact, as we have noted, Tallant frames his arguments around Lowe's notion of identity-dependence and his main thesis is that all persisting things, qua persisting things, must be identity-dependent on a plurality of temporally separated existents (times, at the least) which, according to presentism, do not exist. But, as we shall see now, the appeal to identity-dependence adds nothing to the argument, it simply misapplies the notion. And the presentist can simply deny that persisting things are, in Lowe's sense, identity-dependent upon a plurality of temporally separate objects.

Lowe defines identity-dependence as follows (Lowe 2010, section 4):

X depends for its identity upon y =df. There is a function f such that it is part of the essence of x that x is $f(y)$.

So, for example, the assassination of Caesar is an event that is identity-dependent on Caesar: there is a function, *the assassination of y*, such that it is part of the essence of that event that it is the value of that function for the argument Caesar.¹ Similarly, the event which is the marriage of William and Kate has as part of its essence that it is the value of the function *the marriage of y with z* for those two people as arguments.

¹ Or maybe the function is *the death of y*. Perhaps the event which is the assassination of Caesar would still have occurred if in their eagerness the assassins had stumbled as they rushed, knives out, towards Caesar, but by a happy accident, had stabbed him to death anyway.

So, Tallant's thought is, if x is a persisting object then it is part of its essence that it is the value of a function f , for a set of temporally separated existents, the y s, as arguments.

It is easy to see how to apply this notion if we think of persistence as perdurance. On that view Snuggles is a sum of temporal parts (Tallant 2018: 2212). So he is the value of the function *the sum of* for his temporal parts as arguments. And perhaps it is plausible to think that it is part of his essence that he is the value of that function for temporal parts as arguments. (But could he not have been born earlier, or had a longer or shorter life? These are familiar debates.)

It is harder to see how on an endurantist view Snuggles can be viewed as thus identity-dependent on a plurality of temporally separated entities. According to the endurantist he has no temporal parts (other than himself). The plurality of temporally separated items from this viewpoint can most naturally be thought of as a plurality of times (which is indeed how Tallant writes). But there are many cats besides Snuggles in existence now, and there always have been. Of what function is Snuggles *the* value for a plurality of times (those at which he has existed or will exist) as arguments? It is not obvious. Perhaps we can think of Snuggles, rather, as identity-dependent on a plurality of ordered pairs of times and locations.

It is more natural on the endurantist view to think of Snuggles not as the *value* of a function but as a *function* itself, a function mapping times onto locations. Of course, the presentist cannot accept this. But there is no reason why he should.

In fact, it appears from the passage quoted above from Tallant that he is not thinking of persisting things either as the values of functions (in accord with Lowe's definition) or as themselves functions, but as the *arguments* of functions. He writes, 'there is a function, *being an existence at times other than t* , that O must saturate in order to be, at t , a persisting object'.

A function is saturated by its arguments. The function Tallant seems to have in mind is the function denoted by ‘There is at least one time t^* other than t such that y is an existent at t^* ’. where ‘ t ’ is a designation of a specific time, the present. This is a function whose value for an object O as argument will be the semantic value of ‘there is at least one time t^* other than t such that O is an existent at t^* ’. In short, it is a function mapping objects onto truth-values – a Fregean concept. But the presentist can simply deny that the value of this function for Snuggles as argument is the True, since there are no times other than the present. It is the case, however, he can say, that the *tensed* statement that Snuggles exists now and existed is true. So the concept denoted by ‘ y exists now and existed’ does map Snuggles as argument onto the truth-value the True.

So in sum, the appeal to Lowe’s notion of identity-dependence adds nothing to Tallant’s argument, and is irrelevant, as his own discussion demonstrates and, more generally, the phrasing of the issue using functional notions does not make his argument any more of a challenge to the presentist than when it is stated without them.

II

In effect, I have been arguing that the presentist can define persistence straightforwardly using tense² as follows: x exists and either x existed (did exist) or x will exist.³ He can define endurance by adding the clause ‘ x has no temporal parts other than itself’, thus capturing the intuition that an enduring object exists as a whole, in its entirety,

² The presentist represents tense using temporal operators. To explain persistence in this way, of course, he needs to allow that these can function adverbially so that we can quantify into them, i.e., he must recognise a third grade of temporal involvement (Quine 1955).

³ In fact, this is actually what Lowe himself does (1998: 58): ‘To say that a presently existing object has persisted is just to say that that very object did exist in the past and still does now’.

whenever it exists.⁴ Since he does not recognise any merely past or future existents these definitions cover all cases, i.e., all existents.

I now consider two other discussions in Tallant's paper which might be thought to cast doubt on these definitions.

I first note that the definitions are, of course, equivalent to 'x is a persisting thing (enduring thing) iff it is true that x exists and it is true that x existed or it is true that x will exist (and it is true that x has no temporal proper parts)'.⁴

This is similar to a definition to which Tallant objects as follows (I italicise the most relevant phrases) (2018: 2215):

Even were it the case that those presently existing posits *made it true* that O was wholly present, that's irrelevant to the task at hand. Endurance (e.g.) analyses persistence as a matter of O's *being* wholly present at a range of times. It does not analyse persistence in terms of its *being true* that O was wholly present at a range of times. Of course, against an eternalist backdrop, where we assume the existence of objects past, present and future, there is little difference between the two conditions: if it's true that O is F at t, then O exists at t and is F. But on the presentist model, matters

⁴ What is a temporal part? We can start with the dyadic *part of* relation of classical mereology and try to define 'x is a temporal part of y' as 'x is part of y and x exists only when y exists'. But this makes my head a temporal part of me if, as I fervently hope, it does not outlast me. We also need the endurance-friendly temporally indexed notion of parthood, in accordance with which we can speak of things losing parts, gaining parts, and having parts restored. Then we can say that x is a temporal part of y iff x is a part of y and exists only when y exists and there is no time at which it is a part of y. So the first half of a football match is a temporal part of it. It is a classical mereological part of it, its duration lies within the duration of the whole match and it makes no sense to ask *at which time* it is part of the whole game. But it is controversial whether I have (proper) temporal parts in this sense—which is as it should be.

are very different. So, to the point of this response: if we analyse the persistence of O in terms of *truths*, we aren't adopting endurance or perdurance; neither view analyses persistence in terms of *what is true*.

It might be thought that, given the equivalence noted before the quotation from Tallant, my definition of persistence is vulnerable to Tallant's objection. But, of course, it is not. Nor is any definition. The definition of 'x is a bachelor' as 'x is unmarried and x is a man' can be rephrased as 'it is true that x is unmarried and it is true that x is a man'. This does not mean that the definition of bachelorhood is in terms of truth. Nor is the definition of persistence I gave a definition in terms of truth, though it is equivalent to a definition in which the operator 'it is true that' is employed.

The second part of Tallant's discussion which might be thought to cast doubt on the definitions of persistence and endurantism which I am suggesting the presentist can employ is his discussion of singular propositions.

Tallant suggests that in some way the presentist who wants to acknowledge persistence faces a problem of the same sort facing a presentist who wants to acknowledge singular propositions about the past. He presents the problem as follows (2018: 2216-2217):

Supposing that propositions are complex entities, which refer in virtue of being partly constituted by their referent, what entity can constitute a past-tense singular proposition that refers to a merely past entity? ...To give a case, consider <Caesar crossed the Rubicon>. For this proposition to be the very thing that it is, a proposition that directly refers to Julius Caesar, Caesar must exist and constitute the proposition. If Caesar does not exist, then there is no constituent of this putative singular proposition. If there is no constituent, we have no referring singular proposition that picks out Caesar.

Of course, there is no worry about past-tense singular propositions about present existents, like 'Snuggles was on the sofa'. Equally, there is no worry about regarding such a proposition as denoting the value of the function *y was on the sofa* for the object Snuggles as argument. The concern for the presentist about singular propositions is confined to truths about wholly past entities, which according to him do not exist.

Here the presentist has options. He may say that 'Caesar crossed the Rubicon' does not express a singular proposition of which the object Caesar is a constituent since there is no such object, but a general proposition. He may compare 'Caesar crossed the Rubicon' or 'Queen Anne died' (Prior 1968: 13) with 'the present King of France could have had red hair' or 'the person with origin O could have been brave' (where O is the fertilization of an actually unfertilized ovum by some specific sperm) on an actualist construal. He can equally deny that 'Caesar crossed the Rubicon' denotes the value of the function *x crossed the Rubicon* for Caesar, or any object, as argument.

Alternatively he may say that 'Caesar crossed the Rubicon' does express a singular proposition, the constituent of which is not Caesar, but an existent proxy, say the thisness of Caesar, and that that the sentence can be regarded as denoting the value of the function *x crossed the Rubicon* for that object as argument (Ingram 2016).

Finally, Tallant brings a general argument (2018: 2214) against the compatibility of presentism with any form of persistence. This is based on Davidson's Swampman thought experiment (Davidson 1987: 443-4). Davidson's idea is that Swampman is not a human being because it has the wrong sort of history, the wrong sort of past. So, Tallant argues, accepting this, we have to conclude that if presentism is true there are no human beings, since nothing has *any* past. Mutatis mutandis, I suppose we can conclude that there are no graduates since to be a graduate one has to have had a graduation in one's past.

The reply I think the presentist should give will be obvious from the above. I am a graduate because I graduated. The definition of 'graduate' is tensed. The presentist must resist the inference from 'I graduated' to 'there exists a time other than the present at which I graduated (mutatis mutandis, the actualist must resist the inference from 'I could have been an accountant' to 'there is a possible world in which I am (or a counterpart is) an accountant'). That the presentist must resist this inference is evident; but it is not evidently an easy task since we make apparent singular references to past times ('yesterday', '1066') and speak as if wholly past things existed at more than one past time ('in 1065 William was in Normandy, in 1066, after the Battle of Hastings, in England'). But the mere observation that to be a graduate one must have graduated, or, more controversially, that to be a human being one must have been of a woman born, etc., does not add to the case against presentism. Once again, to emphasise the point, the presentist can and must allow that presently existing things are the subjects of true past (and future) tensed predications.

III

It may be that that the extant arguments in the literature against presentism are conclusive. But the point of my argument has just been that if this is not so then, despite what Tallant says, the presentist need have no sleepless nights about the object-dependence, in Lowe's sense, of persisting things on a plurality of non-existent times. Object-dependence is a legitimate and fruitful notion but it is misapplied in Tallant's argument. The conclusion is that the presentist can accept that there are no non-present times and understand persistence (which he must equate with endurance) in tensed terms, as indeed Lowe does, as we have seen (fn. 3), in a way that makes it compatible with presentism.

References

Ingram, D. 2016. The Virtues of Thisness Presentism. *Philosophical Studies* 173: 2867–2888.

doi: 10.1007/s11098-016-0641-3

Lewis, D. 1986 *On the Plurality of Worlds*, Oxford: Blackwell

Lowe, E. J., 1998 Tense and persistence. In R. Le Poidevin (Ed.) *Questions on Time and Tense* Oxford: Clarendon Press

Lowe, E. J., 2010. Ontological dependence. In E. N. Zalta (Ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2010 Edition).

<<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2010/entries/dependence-ontological/>>

Prior, A.N., *Papers on Time and Tense* Oxford: Clarendon Press

Quine, W. V. O. 1955. Three Grades of Modal Involvement. *Journal of Symbolic Logic* 20 (2):168-169

Tallant, J. 2018 Presentism, persistence and trans-temporal dependence. *Philosophical Studies* 175: 2209–2220. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11098-017-0955-9>