

REPLY TO LUDLOW
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Professor Ludlow proposes that my solution to the triviality problem for presentism is of no help to proponents of

Very Serious Tensism: Every natural language predication is inherently tensed. There are no untensed predications – in particular no time-indexed verbs/predications -- in natural language, hence none can be employed in the metalanguage of the semantics for natural language.

My solution, again, is this. Presentism, I say, should be formulated as the claim that

(Pr_b') for every *x*, if *x* existed, exists or will exist, then *x* is a present thing,

and (Pr_b')'s quantifier interpreted as an unrestricted quantifier, one that ranges over *everything*.

So interpreted, (Pr_b') says of each thing in our most inclusive domain of quantification that it existed, exists or will exist only if it is a present thing. And to say this is to say something that is neither trivially true nor manifestly false.

But Ludlow thinks that Very Serious Tensism (VST) gives trouble. Given VST, the predicates “thing” and “in our most inclusive domain of quantification” are tensed. And if these predicates are tensed, says Ludlow, the interpretation I give of (Pr_b') in the previous paragraph comes to this:

(Triv) each *present* thing *presently* in our most inclusive domain of quantification existed, exists or will exist only if it is a present thing.

But (Triv) is trivial. If (Triv) is what (Pr_b') comes to, then *it* is trivial and my attempt to rescue presentism from banality has failed.

By way of reply: I have no idea whether VST is true. I suspect not, but suppose I'm wrong. Does it follow that (Pr_b') is a trivial truth? Not obviously. If (Triv) were the right interpretation of (Pr_b') , it would be trivial all right. But the presentistic Very Serious Tenser will deny that (Pr_b') says the same thing as (Triv). She'll say, rather, that (Pr_b') comes to

$(Pr_b' + VST)$ for every *past, present or future* thing, if it *existed, exists or will exist*, then it *is* a present thing,

and that $(Pr_b' + VST)$ expresses an unrestricted quantification over every (past, present or future) thing whatsoever.¹ $(Pr_b' + VST)$ accords with the strictures of VST—all of its predicates and verbs are tensed—and is neither trivially true nor manifestly false. (That it's not trivially true is obvious. Some will object that it's manifestly false by invoking the Roman Empire as a counterinstance. *It* existed and isn't present! But for reasons given in my initial piece, this way lies confusion.)

Objection: $(Pr_b' + VST)$, I say, expresses an unrestricted quantification. But if Ludlow and VST are right, there *is* no unrestricted quantification. This is because VST implies that all quantifier expressions in natural language come with (possibly phonologically unrealized) tensed predicate restrictions. (To illustrate: when we say “all men are mortal”, “men” is a predicate restriction on our quantifier expression “all”. Given VST, “men” is implicitly tensed, so that what we really say is something like “all present men are mortal” or maybe “all past, present and future men are mortal.”) Since all natural language quantifier expressions are so restricted, all natural language quantification is restricted quantification.

¹ I presuppose that, for the very serious tensor, quantification over the domain of past, present and future things is as unrestricted as quantification gets. To think otherwise is to think that some things are neither past, present nor future. But I'm not sure that this position can be coherently stated in language that accords with the strictures of VST.

Reply: Fine, let all quantification in ordinary language be restricted. It doesn't follow that all quantification in "the philosophy room" is restricted. Perhaps we don't use unrestricted quantifiers in everyday life, but we know perfectly well what they come to in the philosophy room.

Says Ludlow: not so. Quantifiers introduced in the philosophy room need to be interpreted, and interpretation must ultimately take place in a language we understand—i.e., natural language. If we don't have unrestricted quantification in ordinary language, then neither do we have it in the philosophy room.

In sum, VST implies that all quantifier expressions—whether used in or out of the philosophy room—come with (possibly phonologically unrealized) tensed predicate restrictions, and that, therefore, all quantification is restricted. Wherefore, my attempt at giving a non-trivial, VST-friendly interpretation of (Pr_b') by reading it as $(Pr_b' + VST)$ fails. The latter, I say, is an unrestricted quantification. But given VST, there *are* no unrestricted quantifications.

Thus far the objection. But here we need a distinction. Ludlow uses "restricted quantifier" to mean "a quantifier expression that comes with a (possibly phonologically unrealized) predicate restriction." (So on his usage, "all objects are self-identical" invokes a restricted quantifier: the quantifier "all" is restricted by the predicate "objects".) I use "restricted quantifier" differently. I say that a quantifier is restricted if it ranges over some limited portion rather than the whole of reality. This is to be contrasted with an unrestricted quantifier, one that ranges over the whole of reality, one whose domain is reality *in its entirety*.

If Ludlow and VST are right, there is no unrestricted quantification in his sense: all quantifiers come with tensed predicate restrictions. But this is of interest to my project only if

VST also implies that there is no unrestricted quantification in my sense. When I said that (Pr_b ' + VST)'s quantifier is to be taken as unrestricted, I meant unrestricted in *my* sense, not Ludlow's.

Does VST imply that there is no unrestricted quantification in my sense? I can't see any reason for thinking so. At any rate, Ludlow has given us absolutely no reason for thinking so. I say that a quantifier is unrestricted if it ranges over reality in its entirety rather than a limited portion thereof. Were I a very serious tenses, I'd put it thus: a quantifier is unrestricted (in my sense) if it ranges over all past, present and future things, leaving out none. (Again, I presuppose that, for the very serious tenses, quantification over the domain of past, present and future things is as unrestricted as it gets.)

So when I say "every past, present or future thing is (was or will be) self-identical", what I say is naturally interpreted as expressing quantification over every past, present or future thing, leaving out none (especially if I say it in the philosophy room). Given VST, then, what I say is naturally interpreted as an unrestricted quantification in my sense. Since my quantifier phrase—"every past, present or future thing"—meets the requirements of VST (its determiner "every" is restricted by the tensed predicate "past, present or future thing"), it looks to me as if VST is perfectly consistent with the existence of quantifiers that are unrestricted in my sense.

If so, if VST is consistent with unrestricted quantification in my sense, then stating a VST-friendly, non-trivial thesis of presentism is simplicity itself. Read "every past, present or future thing" as an unrestricted quantifier in my sense and let presentism be the thesis that

(Pr_b ' + VST) for every past, present or future thing, if it existed, exists or will exist, then it is a present thing,

or more simply

(Pr_b'' + VST) every past, present or future thing is a present thing.

Both formulations accord with VST; both are non-trivial. (David Lewis, for instance, would have thought that the predicate “past, present or future thing” applies to a non-present Roman Empire. A. N. Prior would’ve disagreed. Who’s right? Prior, I think, but that he’s right is hardly trivial.)

But Ludlow has a reply. Consider the claim that “every former dinosaur is present.” Since its quantifier “every” is restricted by the past tensed predicate “former dinosaur,” it accords with the strictures of VST. More, it looks to be non-trivial: The non-presentist will think that “former dinosaur” applies to non-present dinosaurs; the presentist will disagree.

Ludlow objects that “every former dinosaur is present” is trivial—trivially true. This is because “former dinosaur” isn’t past tensed at all, but *present* tensed:

It is arguable that ‘former dinosaur’ is a present tensed predicate that is true of absolutely nothing. Being a former dinosaur, like being a former Beatle or a former Syracuse Professor is in fact a property that one has in the present. ‘Former dinosaur/Beatle/Syracuse Professor’ is *presently* true of those individuals that were dinosaurs or Beatles or Syracuse Professors but are no longer. The English word ‘former’ just isn’t a tense; ‘former N’ is a present tense predicate, whatever the N. Indeed, even if we had past tense morphology (i.e. elements like ‘-ed’) on our nouns it is not clear that PAST-Syracuse-Prof wouldn’t just mean that you are *currently* a former Syracuse Professor. (XXXX)

So “former dinosaur”, if Ludlow’s right, is a present tensed predicate that applies (if it applies) only to present things that *were* dinosaurs. Since obviously there are no such things, “every former dinosaur is present” is trivially true in the way that “every flying pig is present” is trivially true.

Ludlow will say the same thing about “past, present or future thing” in (Pr_b’ + VST) and (Pr_b” + VST). “Past, present or future thing,” he’ll say, is a present tensed predicate that means

something like “present thing that was, is or will be a thing.”² So read, (Pr_b’ + VST) comes to “every present thing that was, is or will be a thing is present,” and is trivially true.

Is Ludlow right? Does “past, present or future thing” mean “present thing that was, is or will be a thing”? This is very hard to believe. When I say “past football games were televised,” does “past football games” mean “present things that were football games”? I should think not. It could be true now that past games were televised, even if no present thing *was* a football game. Maybe Ludlow’s right that “past football games” is in some sense a present tensed predicate. But if it is, it’s a present tensed predicate that applies to non-present football games located in the past (if there are such things).

Likewise, I say, with “past thing”. Maybe there’s a sense in which it’s a present tensed predicate. Fine. But as I use it, it means “thing that *was*”, or “thing to which I bear the *later than* relation”. So interpreted, it applies to things that *were*, things located in the past (provided there are such things of course), whether or not they’re also located in the present. So, e.g., if eternalism is true, it applies to the Roman Empire. Likewise with “past, present or future thing”. Even if there’s a sense in which it’s a present tensed predicate, it’s a present-tensed predicate that applies to non-present things like the Roman Empire (if there are such things). Wherefore, it’s not true that “every past, present or future thing is present” means “every present thing that was, is or will be a thing is present.” Wherefore, it’s not true that “every past, present or future thing is present” is trivial.

So far, then, VST implies nothing very interesting about my solution to presentism’s triviality problem. I say that the problem is solved by formulating presentism as the claim that, quantifying unrestrictedly (in my sense),

² This suggestion, or something very close to it, was made by Ludlow in correspondence.

(Pr_b') for every x, if x existed, exists or will exist then x is a present thing.

If VST is right, there are phonologically unrealized tensed predicate restrictions on (Pr_b')'s quantifier. Suppose so. Then (Pr_b') needs disambiguation. I propose the following:

(Pr_b' + VST) For every past, present or future thing x, if x existed, exists or will exist, then x is a present thing.

Or more simply:

(Pr_b'' + VST) Every past, present or future thing is a present thing.

Both accord with the strictures of VST; both are non-trivial. Accordingly, I conclude that Ludlow is mistaken. VST makes no trouble at all for my proposed solution to the triviality problem.

Ludlow thinks that I've got further trouble if we set aside VST and suppose that there are both irreducibly tenseless and irreducibly tensed predicates and verbs. To suppose this is to adopt Less Serious Tensism:

Less Serious Tensism: There are genuine tensed verbs/predicates and genuine tenseless verbs/predicates in natural language and they are not interreducible.

According to Ludlow, Less Serious Tensism (LST) makes trouble for my claim that

(Pr_b') For every x, if x existed, exists or will exist, then x is a present thing

is equivalent to

(Pr_b'') For every x, x is a present thing.

This is because, if LST is true, we need two sets of tenses: genuine tenses and detensed tenses that state relative B-theory positions. So we can say of Fred that he existed_t, where here we apply an irreducibly tensed existence predicate to him. But we can also say of him that he

existed_d, where here we apply a detensed existence predicate of him (a predicate true of him iff his existence is earlier than the time of this utterance). Given LST, what we say of Fred in the one case is not reducible to what we say of him in the other.

If there are these two sets of tenses, then as they stand, (Pr_b') and (Pr_b'') are ambiguous.

We may re-state them as:

(Pr_b'-t) For every x, if x existed_t, exists_t or will exist_t, then x is a present_t thing

(Pr_b''-t) For every x, x is a present_t thing,

or as

(Pr_b'-d) For every x, if x existed_d, exists_d or will exist_d, then x is a present_d thing

(Pr_b''-d) For every x, x is a present_d thing.

Either way, says Ludlow, there's reason to doubt that the first and second claim in each pair are equivalent. This is because he thinks that it's possible that there be objects that existed_d, exists_d or will exist_d but did not exist_t, do not exist_t, and will not exist_t, and that there be objects that existed_t, exists_t or will exist_t but did not exist_d, do not exist_d, and will not exist_d. (I doubt that this *is* possible, but set this aside.) If so, then it could be that everything that existed_t, exists_t or will exist_t is a present_t thing, but that some things (things that existed_d, exists_d or will exist_d but did not exist_t, do not exist_t, and will not exist_t) aren't present_t. If so, then it could be that (Pr_b' -t) is true and that (Pr_b'' -t) is false. Likewise with (Pr_b' -d) and (Pr_b'' -d). Wherefore, my claim that (Pr_b') and (Pr_b'') are equivalent stands refuted.

But I stand by my claim. I wrote:

...to say that only present things existed, exist or will exist is to say that

(Pr_b') For every x, if x existed, exists or will exist, then x is a present thing.

(Pr_b') invokes an *unrestricted* quantifier, one that ranges over *everything*.... We can state the same thing differently by shifting to a restricted quantifier, one whose domain is restricted to the class of all

things in time, the class of all things which existed, exist now, or will exist.... Then we get:

(Pr_b'') For every x, x is a present thing,

where here we quantify restrictedly over the domain of all things in time.

(XXXX)

What I claimed, then, was this:

(*) The sentence “for every x, if x existed, exists or will exist, then x is a present thing” is equivalent to the sentence “for every x, x is a present thing” if we interpret the first sentence’s quantifier as unrestricted (in my sense) and the second sentence’s quantifier as restricted to the domain of things that existed, exist or will exist.

Now, if LST is right and there are Ludlow’s two tenses, (*)’s underlined occurrences of “existed, exists or will exist” and “present” are ambiguous. Occurrences of the former can be interpreted as “existed_t, exists_t or will exist_t” or as “existed_d, exists_d or will exist_d”. Occurrences of the latter can be interpreted as “present_t” or as “present_d”. Since I meant to use “existed, exists or will exist” univocally, a reasonable disambiguation of (*) will interpret both occurrences of “existed, exists or will exist” in the same way; likewise with “present”. There are four ways of disambiguating. First way: interpret each occurrence of “existed, exists or will exist” as “existed_t, exists_t or will exist_t” and each occurrence of “present” as “present_t”. Then (*) is true: (Pr_b'-t) and (Pr_b''-t) are manifestly equivalent if the former’s quantifier ranges over *all* entities—including those that existed_d, exist_d, will exist_d, existed_t, exist_t or will exist_t—and the latter’s quantifier ranges over just those things that existed_t, exists_t or will exist_t. Second way: interpret “existed, exists or will exist” in (*) as “existed_d, exists_d or will exist_d”. Then, again, (*) is manifestly true. Likewise with the next two ways. Given a reasonable disambiguation of what I said, then, what I said was true.

Ludlow also thinks that LST gives trouble for my claim that

(Pr_c) only present things (tenselessly) exist

implies

(Pr_b) Only present things existed, exist or will exist.

I reasoned as follows. To say of something that it *tenselessly* exists is just to say that our most inclusive quantifiers range over it. It may be past, present, or future; we say nothing about *which* when we say of it that our widest quantifiers “pick it up.” So, I said, to say that only present things (tenselessly) exist is to say something like: for every x (using our most unrestricted quantifier), x is a present thing.

Now, if (Pr_c) amounts to the claim that, quantifying unrestrictedly over our most inclusive domain of quantification, everything is a present thing, then (Pr_c) trivially implies that, quantifying unrestrictedly over that same domain, everything that existed, exists or will exist is a present thing. But to say that everything that existed, exists or will exist is a present thing is just to say that, for every x, if x existed, exists or will exist then x is a present thing, which is just to say that only present things existed, exist or will exist. In short, (Pr_c) implies (Pr_b).

Not so, says Ludlow—not if LST is true. His argument here is a bit compressed; perhaps it’s meant to go as follows. Given LST, we have Ludlow’s two tenses and (Pr_b) and (Pr_c) need disambiguation. Take (Pr_c). If we interpret it as Ludlow’s

(Pr_c’) only present_t things are existent_d,

where “existent_d” applies to a thing x iff x has some B-position or other, and we interpret (Pr_b) as

(Pr_b –t) only present_t things existed_t, exist_t, or will exist_t,

then there’s reason to doubt that (Pr_c) implies (Pr_b). This is because, says Ludlow, it’s *possible* that there be things that existed_t, exist_t, or will exist_t but fail to exist_d. If so, then it might be true

that only present_t things are existent_d, but false that only present_t things existed_t, exist_t, or will exist_t.

In reply, I find it very hard to conceive of the possibility envisaged by Ludlow. For it to be true that only present_t things are existent_d, but false that only present_t things existed_t, exist_t, or will exist_t, there would need to be non-present things that existed_t, exist_t, or will exist_t but nevertheless aren't earlier than, later than or simultaneous with anything. I doubt that this is possible.

But suppose I'm wrong. Then I still say that (Pr_c) implies (Pr_b) (read as (Pr_b -t)). For I didn't intend (Pr_c) to be read as (Pr_c'). I said that (Pr_c) amounts to the claim that, quantifying unrestrictedly (in my sense), everything is present. To quantify unrestrictedly in my sense is to quantify over *all* things—including things that existed_d, exist_d, will exist_d, existed_t, exist_t or will exist_t. Obviously enough, if all such things are present_t, then all things that existed_t, exist_t or will exist_t are present_t. But to say that all things that existed_t, exist_t or will exist_t are present_t is just to say that only present_t things existed_t, exist_t, or will exist_t. I stand by my claim, then, that (Pr_c) implies (Pr_b).

Finally, Ludlow complains that I dismiss the most promising formulation of presentism, (Pr_c). But this isn't entirely accurate. I do put an argument in the mouth of my opponent that (Pr_c) is trivially false, but I don't endorse her argument. (Quite the contrary. Her argument is that (Pr_c) is trivially false because it implies (Pr_b), a trivial falsehood. But I spend the bulk of the paper arguing that (Pr_b) is not a trivial falsehood.)

So I don't exactly dismiss (Pr_c). That said, I don't think of it as the most felicitous formulation of presentism. This is because, as I construe it, it says that—quantifier wide open—everything is present. But suppose you believe that all things in time are present but that

some “atemporal” things—e.g., sets, properties, and God—aren’t present. Then you reject (Pr_c). Still, I’m happy enough to call you a presentist. You’re a presentist, I say, because you accept (Pr_b).³

³ Thanks to Peter Ludlow and Ted Sider for helpful correspondence.