Every Now and Then, no-futurism faces no sceptical problems

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Abstract. Tallant (2007) has challenged my recent defence of no-futurism (Button 2006), but he does not discuss the key to that defence: that no-futurism's primitive relation 'x is real-as-of y' is not symmetric. I therefore answer Tallant's challenge in the same way as I originally defended no-futurism. I also clarify no-futurism by rejecting a common mis-characterisation of the growing-block theorist. By supplying a semantics for no-futurists, I demonstrate that no-futurism faces no sceptical challenges. I conclude by considering the problem of how to interpret the relation 'x is real-as-of y'.

Tallant (2007) challenges my recent defence of no-futurism (Button 2006), but does not discuss the key to that defence: that no-futurism's primitive relation 'x is real-as-of y' is not symmetric. I therefore answer Tallant's challenge in the same way as I originally defended no-futurism. Doing so allows me to clarify what no-futurists should believe and to supply a variety of semantic principles for no-futurism. It also shows why no-futurists have nothing to fear from sceptical challenges. This is not to say that no-futurism has no weaknesses, however, and I conclude by suggesting where attacks on no-futurism would be better targeted.
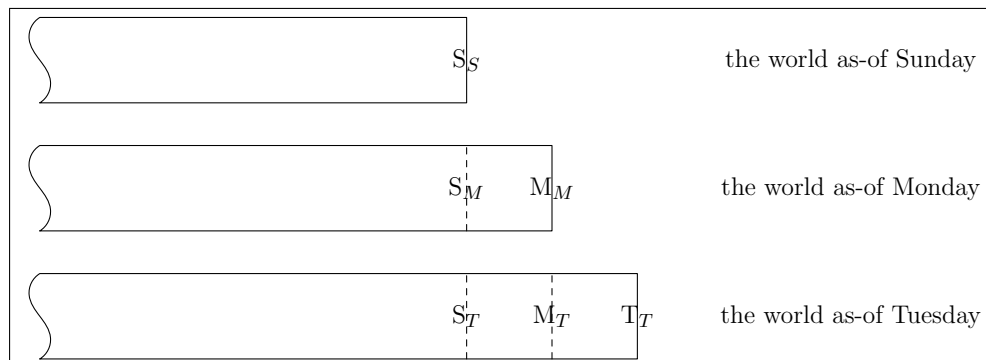
1 Clarifying no-futurism

No-futurists hold that the PAST and the PRESENT are real, but that the FUTURE is not. The capitalization indicates that these are not merely temporal indexicals; they capture the ontological privilege that the PRESENT moment has by virtue of being the last moment of time. A no-futurist, of course, believes that she is PRESENT, but this belief may be problematic. Seemingly, if the no-futurist is PRESENT, then all her real PAST predecessors were wrong to think that they were PRESENT. So, by a sceptical induction, the no-futurist should think that her belief is also wrong. In which case, no-futurism collapses (Bourne 2002: 362).[1]

I argued that this problem dissolves by recognising that 'real-as-of' is not a symmetric relation (Button 2006). I can clarify this claim by rejecting a standard

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[1] Cf. Braddon-Mitchell 2004: 200, Button 2006: 131 and Tallant 2007: 84.

characterization of no-futurism, according to which time is represented by a sequence of increasingly large blocks:[2]

S$_S$		the world as-of Sunday
S$_M$ M$_M$		the world as-of Monday
S$_T$ M$_T$ T$_T$		the world as-of Tuesday

Supposedly, the most recent (bottom) block *depicts* the world as it *is*, and the others *depict* the world as it *was*.[3] However, several Sundays appear on the diagram: Sunday as-of Sunday (marked as 'S$_S$'), Sunday as-of Monday ('S$_M$'), and Sunday as-of Tuesday ('S$_T$'). This threatens to make time two-dimensional. To avoid this, no-futurists are taken to hold that the whole of reality *is depicted* by just one block: the most recent. So, if on Tuesday we want to *check* the truth-value of some sentence-token *uttered* on Sunday, we *must look* to S$_T$ (the only Sunday).

Suppose that it *is* Tuesday. Consider a token utterance, U, of 'Sunday *is* PRESENT' that *was uttered* on Sunday. For the no-futurist, U is true only if Tuesday is not real. But given the block picture, U *was was* false, for it *neglected* T$_T$'s existence. This is at the heart of the sceptical challenge: all our previous utterances *were* wrong, so we probably *are*. (Indeed, if U *was* false, then the block marked 'the world as-of Sunday' *depicts* reality as it never *was*.)

To avoid this problem, we must maintain that U *was* true: that it *was* right on Sunday to deny T$_T$'s existence. This requires that the Sunday we consider on Tuesday, when evaluating U , corresponds with S$_S$. How could this be possible? Only if the real-as-of relation is not symmetric. The no-futurist should say that, as-of any moment x, only x and moments earlier than x are real.[4] In that case, Tuesday is not real-as-of Sunday. Nothing about Sunday—not even its relation to Tuesday—*is* or *was* altered by Tuesday's being real-as-of Tuesday. Sunday is not 'changed in moving from PRESENT to PAST' (or some such clumsly locution); Sunday as-of Tuesday is identical with Sunday as-of Sunday.[5] Consequently, U *was* true, as *were* all similar PAST utterances. The sceptical problem melts away.

Evidently, the block picture is misleading. To model the asymmetry of real-as-of, each block would have to be thought of as embedded in the block immediately

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[2]Cf. Dainton 2001: 69–71

[3]Italicization indicates that the verb is to be read as tensed.

[4]See §5 for how to read 'are' here.

[5]Since no properties of (or relations between) moments *change* with the passage of time, McTaggart's argument also has no purchase against no-futurism. This is, in essence, Lowe's (1998: 47) response to McTaggart.

beneath it in such a way that, as you move from right to left in assessing the truth of past-tensed utterances, you mysteriously move up through the blocks and the blocks beneath disappear. This is a wholly inadequate image, but we should not have expected it to be easy—or even possible—to represent time spatially. To picture time is to aim at a complete description of reality, true for all times. Having denied that real-as-of is symmetric, no-futurists should just deny that such a description is possible, for the total reality of moments 'differs' from moment to moment. The no-futurist must therefore part company with Tooley, who claims 'there can be a complete and consistent description of the world that is not a description from any particular temporal perspective' (1997: 16).[6] This view causes the sceptical problem, but it is this view that my no-futurist explicitly rejects.[7]

2 Tallant's challenge

Tallant (2007: 85) argues that the preceding account does not distinguish 'simple indexical' tense (symbolised as '*is*') from tense 'that ascribes some component to our ontology' ('*IS*'). The sceptical problems then returns in the following form:

> Each of our predecessors *believed* that 'it *IS* the case that this moment *IS* PRESENT'. If they believed such, and we believe that 'it *IS* the case that this moment *IS* PRESENT', then we must find some reason for thinking that we *ARE* correct in thinking that our claim *IS* true, as opposed to thinking that our claim *WAS-is*-'present' and, hence, *WAS-is*-true. (Tallant 2007: 86)

Tallant fears that '*IS*' and '*is*' can diverge, so that I merely *WAS-is* right at PAST moments to think 'I *AM* (PRESENT)'. How should we understand this concern?

Perhaps the worry is that that my account of no-futurism neglects some significant difference between the sentences 'I *AM*' and 'I *am* PRESENT'. This concern is groundless. Bourne's sceptical challenge arose by separating expressions that ascribe ontological privilege from those that are mere indexicals. It does not matter whether this separation is indicated by using different verbs ('*IS*' versus '*is*') or by using different independent grammatical particles ('PRESENT' versus 'this moment'); no additional metaphysical distinction hangs upon this purely grammatical choice. So I can address this concern as I did the original sceptical problem.

I would worry that Sunday *WAS*, but *IS* not, the last moment of time, only if I believed in an 'objective past' (Tallant 2007: 86) that is invariant from moment to moment: a single moment that *is* PRESENT from the perspective of anyone at any time. The no-futurist denies the possibility of a moment-invariant description of reality, on the grounds that real-as-of is not symmetric. So, suppose it *IS* Tuesday. Me-on-Tuesday *SAYS*: 'me-on-Monday merely *WAS* correct to think he *IS* (PRESENT); I *AM* (PRESENT)'. Suppose further that, as me-on-Tuesday *LOOKS*

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[6]Cf. Tooley 1997: 30, 41, 416.

[7]See Button 2006: 133–4 for further details of the no-futurist's response to the sceptical challenge.

at it, me-on-Monday *SAID* exactly the same thing with regard to me-on-Sunday. As-of Monday, me-on-Tuesday *IS* not real, since Tuesday is later than Monday. So from me-on-Tuesday's perspective, me-on-Tuesday *WAS* correct. There is simply no threatening induction. (Cf. Button 2006: 133.)

3 Semantic considerations

Perhaps Tallant's worry is that anything with the truth conditions 'Monday *IS* time's last moment' *IS* false, so the Monday-token merely *WAS*-(*is*) true, but *IS* false. This thought needs some unpacking. A token of the type 'Monday *IS* PRESENT' *IS* indeed false on Tuesday if I *UTTER* it on a Tuesday, but the token in question *WAS UTTERED* on Monday. To consider this argument, we need to consider how to evaluate the PRESENT truth of PAST utterances, which requires an account of no-futurism's semantics. I shall briefly set aside Tallant's concerns to supply one.[8]

The semantics of future-tensed statements lies beyond the scope of this paper, so consider a past- or present-tensed token, U, made at time t_1 about some event E. First, consider U's truth-value at t_1. (The abbreviation '[is/was]' should be treated as follows: if we *are* at t and we wish to evaluate U's truth at t, read every instance of the abbreviation as '*is*'; if we *are* at some later moment, read every instance as '*was*'.)

(i) U [is/was] true at t_1 iff either:

   (a) U [is/was] present-tensed and E and t_1 are real-as-of each other; or
   (b) U [is/was] past-tensed and, for some t earlier than t_1, E and t are real-as-of each other.

Next, we require a semantic principle for evaluating U's truth value at any moment t_2 which is later than t_1. Three incompatible principles are available:

(ii) U [is/was] true at t_2 iff U *was* true at t_1.

(iii) U [is/was] true at t_2 iff either:

   (a) U *was* present-tensed and E and t_2 are real-as-of each other; or
   (b) U *was* past-tensed and, for some t_* earlier than t_2, E and t_* are real-as-of each other.

(iv) U [is/was] truth-valueless at t_2.

To see the difference between these principles, suppose that a relieved Gaul *exclaimed* 'Caesar *is crossing* the Rubicon!' as Caesar *crossed* the Rubicon. By (ia), this token *was* true when Caesar *crossed* the Rubicon. Hence, if we adopt (ii), this token *is*

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[8]Cf. Tooley's (1997: 200–3) and Bourne's (2002: 368–9) non-token-reflexive semantics, particularly their discussion of truth at a time. This account shares features of Lowe's token-reflexive account (1998: 45–6), replacing talk of 'simultaneity' with 'x and y are real-as-of each other'.

true, even though, by (ia), anyone who *says* in 2007 'Caesar *is crossing* the Rubicon' *says* something false. By contrast, if we adopt (iii), the Gaul's token *is* false, since it is evaluated exactly as if it were a fresh token of the same type. Finally, by (iv), the token *is* truth-valueless. (One might be motivated to adopt (iv) by the thought that it is as peculiar to ask whether the Gaul's token *is* true as it is to ask whether Caesar's hair *is* black.)

Tallant will maintain that the preceding discussion treats all the verbs in (i)–(iv) as 'simple indexicals'. He will insist that the no-futurist should consider a set of principles exactly like (i)–(iv), but with all the italicized verbs capitalized to make them ontologically ascriptive. Call the resulting principles (I)–(IV). Suppose that the no-futurist adopts either (III) or (IV). If Tuesday IS PRESENT, then a token on Monday of 'this *IS* time's last moment' *WAS* true (by (IA)) and *is* true (by (ia) and (ii)), but *IS* not true (by (III) or (IV)). The same considerations apply to all PAST tokens. By a sceptical semantic induction, we reach Tallant's feared conclusion that I merely *WAS-is* right.

The no-futurist could just respond by accepting (II). Then earlier utterances *ARE* right if and only if they *WERE* right, and the semantic induction becomes favourable rather than sceptical. Indeed, a favourable induction is available even to no-futurists who reject (II): that every earlier token *WAS* true suggests that the current token *IS*. Which induction is correct? That we have to ask this question at all indicates that something has gone awry. For the sceptical semantic induction to be a legitimate induction, the tokens in the inductive base and the current token must be relevantly similar. The inductive base comprises PAST tokens, and it is their PASTNESS that *RENDERS* them not true (everyone, after all, agrees that they *WERE* true). So the no-futurist will only accept that this base *IS* relevant to my current token Tuesday IS PRESENT if the no-futurist already believes that the current token *IS* (or *MIGHT BE*) a PAST token. That is precisely what the no-futurist denies: by the asymmetry of real-as-of, as-of any moments, there are no later moments.

We are at the heart of the matter. No-futurists would only require a two-dimensional semantics (indexical versus ontological) if they held a two-dimensional view of time, but the two-dimensional view was rejected in §1. The semantic objection, like the original puzzle, presupposes a metaphysics that no-futurists reject.

4   Immunity to all sceptical challenges

To prevent further misdirected attacks on no-futurism, it is worth diagnosing the root cause of the sceptical challenges. Tallant begins his challenge with the words 'suppose that we are in the PAST' (2007: 85). No-futurists will immediately interject that this supposition is always false: whenever I *am*, there are no later moments, so I cannot *be* PAST. Sceptical problems would indeed arise if no-futurists were committed to something like:

(1) there is exactly one moment x such that, any token of 'x is PRESENT', uttered at any moment y, is true.

Someone who holds this principle will be genuinely troubled by the supposition that she is PAST. Bourne's original problem arises by reading the verbs tenselessly.[9] Tallant's problem arises by reading the verbs as ontologically-ascriptive. Other problems might arise by reading the verbs in some other way. But this is all irrelevant, since no-futurists reject all readings of (1). Since real-as-of is not symmetric, no-futurists instead endorse:

(2) as-of any moment y, there *is* exactly one moment x such that any token of 'x *is* PRESENT', *uttered* at y, [*is/was*] true,

which is compatible with the no-futurist thesis

(3) for any moment x, any token of 'x *is* PRESENT' *uttered* at x [*is/was*] true.

Sceptical worries dissolve, for ontological ascription and indexicality are bound together. Tallant omits the asymmetry of real-as-of in his discussion of my solution, but it is all that my solution to the original problem consisted in. It solves his challenge too, and it blocks any sceptical induction from the falsity of PAST statements of no-futurism, because all the relevant PAST statements *were* true (and, by (ii), still *are*).

5   Interpreting 'real-as-of'

Capitalization of temporal terms was introduced to disambiguate ontology from indexicality. Since we have seen that these do not come apart, the no-futurist can dispense with the convention. Furthermore, all verbs can be read as tensed (unless explicitly stated otherwise), so the demand to italicize verbs can be relaxed. No-futurists should feel free to write normal English sentences again.

One verb, however, deserves special attention. No-futurists claim that, as-of any moment, only earlier and simultaneous moments are real. Someone might ask: is the 'are' in the thesis to be read as tensed or tenseless? This question misunderstands no-futurism. The 'is' in 'x is real-as-of y' is neither tensed nor tenseless. The relation 'x is real-as-of y' is a primitive of no-futurism, and the verb it includes is just a part of that primitive. Tense and PRESENTNESS supervene upon real-as-of relations, and tenseless truths (i.e. truths that are true at every moment) follow in their wake. But it is clearly nonsensical to demand that the relation itself must be either tensed or tenseless.

Attacks on no-futurism should focus on the interpretation of this relation. In particular, some may object that it is impossible for x to exist relative to y, without y existing relative to x. If this objection carries, then'x is real-as-of y' cannot be interpreted as 'x exists relative to y'. It will follow that all moments of time exist relative to each other (albeit without being 'real-as-of' each other), and no-futurism will have become a version of the tenseless theory of time, with 'x is real-as-of y' interpreted as some transitive, reflexive, non-symmetric accessibility relation

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[9]Cf. Button 2006: 132

between co-tenselessly-existing objects and moments. This would vindicate Bourne's claim (2002) that the only plausible theories of time are presentism and the tenseless theory.

But why should it be unacceptable to relativize existence? The relation 'x exists relative to y' is still, for the no-futurist, symmetric within moments, so synchronic metaphysics is unaffected. No-futurists are simply telling us to take seriously the idea that reality as a whole differs from moment to moment. To maintain that this idea is implausible is just to refuse to engage with tensed theories of time altogether.[10]

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