

Phil 420: *Metaphysics*
Spring 2008

[Handout 19]

A. N. Prior: *The Notion of the Present*

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§ Main Theses

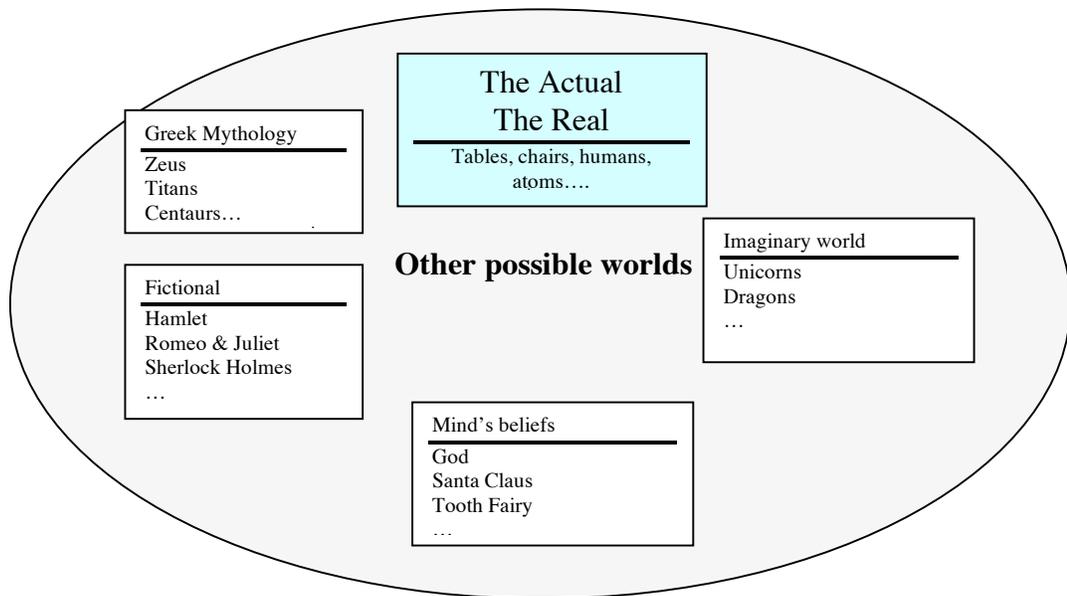
1. *The present and the real are the same concept.*
2. *The present simply is the real considered in relation to two particular species of unreality: the past and the future.*

§ Prior's Philosophy of the Real

The other view:

___ The real world or the actual world is just a *region* of some larger universe which contains other regions as well: possible worlds, imaginary worlds, and so on.

___ Meinong: It is just narrow-mindedness and parochialism to single out the real world as a region of special interest; the "prejudice in favor of the actual."



Prior's Critique:

This way of conceiving the relation between the real and the unreal is profoundly mistaken and misleading. The most important way in which it is misleading is that it minimizes, or makes a purely arbitrary matter, the vast and stark *difference* that there is between the real and every form of unreality.

The correct analysis: with qualifying prefix

“Greek myth-makers have said that...” “Jones imagines that...” “It could be that...”

Prior’s View:

1. To say that *X* is the case in the real or the actual world, or that it is really or actually or in fact the case, is just to say that it is the case – flat, and without any prefix whatsoever.
2. Talk of the real world is not a metaphorical funding-up or talk in which our sentences have a special kind of prefix.
3. “Really,” “actually,” “in fact,” “in the real world” are strictly *redundant* expressions – that, and not any prejudice or provincialism, is their specialness.

§ Prior’s Philosophy of the Present

It is tempting to think of the present as a region of the universe in which certain things happen, and the past and the future as other regions in which other things happen. But this picture doesn’t bring out what is so *special* about the present – it doesn’t bring out the way in which the present is *real* and the past and future are not.

I want to suggest that the reality of the present consists in what the reality of anything else consists in – the absence of a qualifying prefix.

Two ways for the present fact to be real:

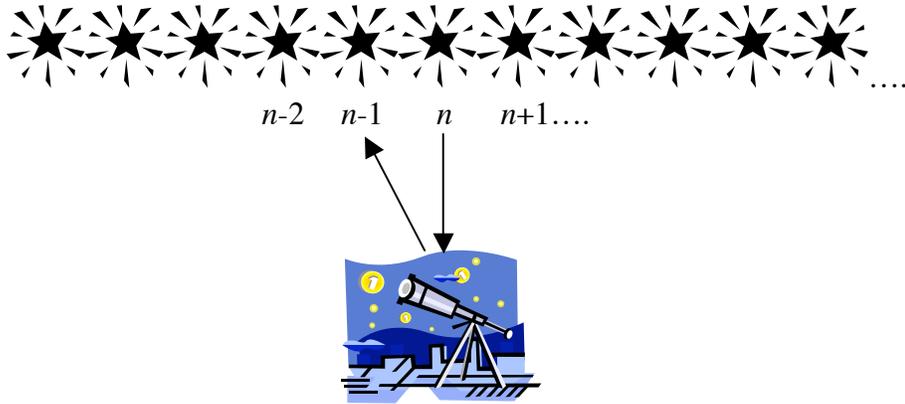
- (i) being a fact at the present
- (ii) being a past fact (its having taken place; its pastness) itself is a present fact

Notoriously, much of what is present isn’t present permanently; the present is a shifting, changing thing.

§ Tense

There are laws of *tense logic*, and the conception of the present is deeply embedded in the syntax of that discipline.

1. Suppose we have observed some distant body a regularly repeating process of pulsation. We have just observed one of these pulsation, and as the body is a very distant one, we know that the pulsation we are observing, happened some time to.
2. We now consider the pulsation immediately after the one we are observing, and ask whether this next pulsation is in fact going on right now, or is really still to come, or has occurred already.
3. If the distant body is having its *n*th pulsation as we perceive it having its *n-1*th, then the *n*th and the perception of the *n-1*th are *simultaneous*, not just from such and such a point of view or such a frame of reference.



4. Time enters physical science through intervals by which one event may be earlier or later than another. Whether the events are the case or merely have been or will be, is of no concern to the scientist, so he uses a language in which the difference between being and having been and being about to be is inexpressible.
5. The interval between an earlier event A and a later event B is n time units. The only interval a scientist will give a definite value is a space-time one.

§ **Presentism** (from *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*)

Some A Theorists believe that there are crucial ontological differences between time and the dimensions of space. For some A Theorists also endorse a view known as “Presentism,” and others endorse a view that we will call “The Growing Universe Theory.”

1. Presentism is the view that only present objects exist. More precisely, it is the view that, necessarily, it is always true that only present objects exist.
2. According to Presentism, if we were to make an accurate list of all the things that exist — i.e., a list of all the things that our most unrestricted quantifiers range over — there would be not a single *non-present* object on the list. Thus, you and the Taj Mahal would be on the list, but neither Socrates nor any future Martian outposts would be included.
3. And it's not just Socrates and future Martian outposts, either — the same goes for any other putative object that lacks the property of being present. All such objects are unreal, according to Presentism.