

Phil 420: *Metaphysics*  
Spring 2008

[Handout 20]

Dean Zimmerman: *The Privileged Present: Defending an “A-Theory” of Time*

Professor JeeLoo Liu

## Introduction

Time and space are analogous in various ways. objects exist in both time and space; events can be separated by distances in both time and space; matter moves continuously through space and time. In recognition of the analogies, physicists lump the two together under the heading of “space-time.” How far does this analogy go? Very far, according to J. J. C. Smart. Just as *objects that are distant in space are real*, objects that are distant in time are real. Just as there is nothing special about *here* (beyond the fact that it is the place where *I am*), there is nothing special about *now* (beyond the fact that it is the time when I am).

Dean Zimmerman rejects these alleged analogies. The present is special; it is the only time whose events and objects are truly real.

From *Contemporary Debates in Metaphysics*, Blackwell 2008

## § Preface

### The disputes on the nature of time:

- (1) Are there objective differences between what is past, present and future?
- (2) Are present events and things somehow more “real” than those wholly in the past or future?

**Zimmerman:** Affirmative answers to both questions sound obvious and commonsensical to me.

## § A-theories versus B-theories

**A-properties:** *being past, being present, being future*

**B-properties:** *being earlier than, being later than, and being simultaneous*

A-theorists:	B-theorists:
The metaphysicians who regard A-properties as fundamental, and B-relations as derivative.	The metaphysicians who regard B-relations as fundamental, and the A-properties as derivative.

They believe in some sort of objective distinction between what is present and what is past and what is future.	They don't believe in any objective distinction between what is present and what is past and what is future.
They answer question (1) in the affirmative. The present is distinguished from past and future in a way that is not relative to any other temporal thing, such as a conversation, a time, or a frame of reference.	They think that when we say that certain events and times are past, present, and future, we are not describing the world "as it is in itself"; we are merely describing the temporal locations of things relative to one particular temporal location – the point in time at which the description is being given.

§ Varieties of A-Theories

A-Theories	
<b>(1) Presentism</b>	Only the present is real. The past is no longer real, and the future is not yet real. ___ They give affirmative answers to both (1) and (2) above.
<b>(2) Moving Spotlight Theory</b>	We imagine a moving spotlight traversing in time. What is illuminated is the present, what has been illuminated is the past, and what has not yet been illuminated is the future. ___ They give an affirmative answer to (1), but not to (2).
<b>(3) Growing Block Theory</b>	Both past and present events, individuals, times are real; the future is not real. ___ They give an affirmative answer to (1), but they give partially negative answer to (2).

**(1) Presentism (Saint Augustine, Prior, Zimmerman)**

“**Presentism**” is the usual name given to a version of the A-theory that accepts, at face value, the differences among past, present, and future things this way:

\_\_\_ **What it is for an event or thing to “move” from the future into the present, and from the present into the past, is to come into existence and then go out of existence.**

\_\_\_ **There exist only present events, individuals and times – assuming that times are sums or collections of simultaneous events.**

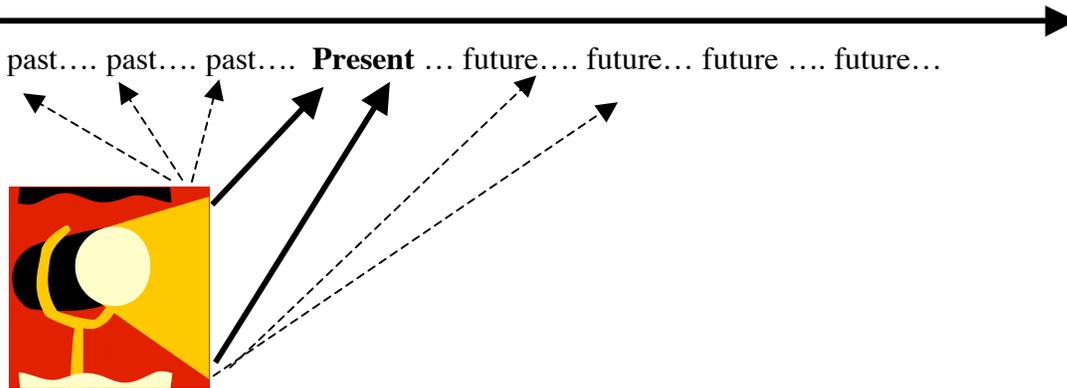
Saint Augustine:

\_\_\_ It is abundantly clear that neither the future nor the past exist, and therefore it is not strictly correct to say that there are three times, past, present and future.”

**(2) The Moving Spotlight Theory (Quentin Smith, Timothy Williamson)**

On the moving-spotlight A-theory, future and past events and things are just as much a part of the furniture of the world as present events and things. But there is something special about the ones that are present – they are “lit up” in some way. Before and after they are being illuminated, they reside in darkness.

Past and future things are in no meaningful sense “less real” than present things. They lack a peculiar property called “presentness”; but, as they acquire and lose this property, they undergo no interesting changes of any other kind.



**(3) The Growing-block Theory (C. D. Broad, Robert Adams, Peter Forrest)**

An intermediate form of the A-theory accepts the existence of past and present events, things, and times, but denies the reality of the future.

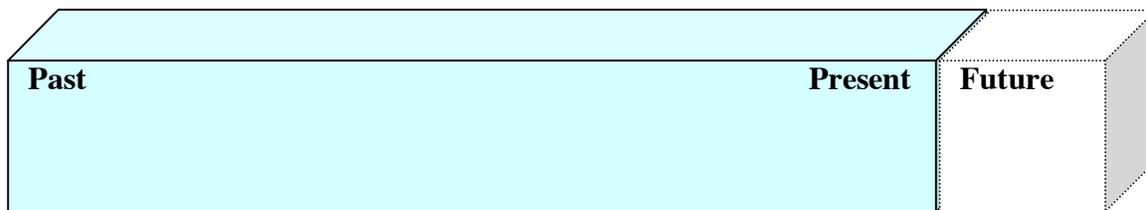
\_\_\_ Although both past and present things and events exist, present events differ from past ones in that there are no events later than them.

\_\_\_ Being present is simply a matter of being on the “**cutting edge**” of a growing universe spread out in four dimensions; ceasing to be present, and becoming past, involves no intrinsic change whatsoever.

Broad:

\_\_\_ “The essence of a present event is, not that it precedes future events, but that there is quite literally *nothing* to which it has the relation of precedence.”

\_\_\_ **“Nothing has happened to be the present by becoming past except that fresh slices of existence have been added to the total history of the world.”**



## § Objections and Replies

\* [First Objection]: The A-theory has no truthmakers for truths about the past.

### “truthmakers”

\_\_\_ Whenever someone says something, and what they said was true, then there must be something “in the world” – some real object, thing, event, state of affairs, or fact – that “makes” what they said true. These things are the truthmakers.

### “the truthmaker principle”

\_\_\_ For every true proposition, there must exist something that *requires* that the proposition be true; in other words, a thing that could not possibly exist, unless the proposition in question is true.

### The objection:

\_\_\_ According to the Presentists, there is nothing more to the world than the way it is now. So they have no truthmakers for truth about the past.

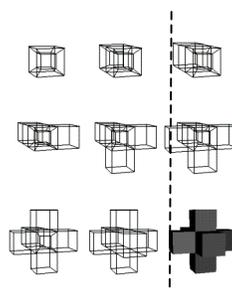
### The reply:

\_\_\_ There are “backward-looking” properties that objects *really have*, such as *having been occupied by a dinosaur 150,000,000 years ago*. [Liu: huh????]

\* [Second Objection]: The A-theory is in conflict with the theory of Relativity

### [A]

1. Relativity is formulated in terms of a four-dimensional manifold of space-time points. Taken at face value, the theory attributes important spatiotemporal structure to this manifold. One of the most important kinds of structure is exhibited by sets of points that constitute a “straight line” running in a time-like direction.
2. But the A-theorist must think that one instantaneous, three-dimensional “slice” of the four-dimensional universe corresponds to the *real* present moment. And the *Presentist* A-theory is committed to the view that only that slice of the block exists. But these lines are composed of points that must come from different instantaneous slices; so, according to the Presentist, when one of them exists, none of the others does.
3. Thus, the A-theory cannot allow anything to exhibit the important spatiotemporal structure of a straight line in a time-like direction.



Only one slice is *present*

**The Reply:**

\_\_\_ The *Presentist* A-theory is not necessarily committed to the view that only that slice of the block exists. Thus (2) above is false.

**[B]**

1. The structure relativity attributes to space-time does not single out just one set of points as “the time” of a given event within the block. There are many different angles at which the block can be sliced into sets of points that look for all the world like instantaneous, three-dimensional states of the universe – or “times.” No one of these ways of slicing it into a series of times is better than any other – which angle will seem natural to a given person will depend upon her state of motion.
2. But the A-theorist must suppose that there is now, has always been, and will always be a fact of the matter about which parts of space-time are really present all together, and these facts will privilege one way of dividing the four-dimensional block into a series of truly “co-present” slices.
3. Since the A-theory posts structure within space-time that is not countenanced by relativity, it contradicts the theory.

**The Reply:**

\_\_\_ The objector’s point is that if fundamental physics can’t see a distinction between the time that is present and the ones that are not, then there is no distinction to be made. But the verdict is made too soon. *Presentist* A-theory provides a layer of space-time structure that relativity fails to mention. It is not a major crime.

**§ Why Think the A-Theory Is True?****[Argument from the Commonsense]:**

1. It is simply part of commonsense that the past and future are less real than the present; that the temporal difference between events and things goes much deeper than the spatial difference between events and things.
2. What it is for some statement to be commonsensical is just for it to seem obviously true to most sane human beings; for it to be part of the stock of things we all take for granted.
3. Therefore, something’s being commonsensical must be allowed to count very strongly in its favor, other things being equal.
4. Unless we are willing to become extreme skeptics, we must allow that it is reasonable to believe things that seem obviously true, in the absence of special reasons to doubt them.
5. The A-theory preserves the commonsense conviction, and the *B*-theory does not.
6. Therefore, the A-theory is the better theory.

## § Conclusion

### [The Argument from *Reasonableness*]

1. In philosophy, the commonsensical is “innocent until proven guilty.” It is reasonable to believe something that seems obvious, unless there are significant reasons to doubt it.
2. I find that I believe things that imply the A-theory. It remains *reasonable* for me to *believe* the A-theory.
3. Often the best one can say for a metaphysical theory is that it is *reasonable* to believe it.
4. Therefore, the A-theory remains to be an acceptable (the best?) metaphysical theory.

I would not claim to *know* that the A-theory is true, but, in my view, few philosophers should claim to *know* the substantive philosophical doctrines they defend against their equally intelligent and well-informed philosophical opponents.

### Liu's Qs:

- (i) Is the A-theory *really* the theory that complies with the commonsense?
- (ii) Even if it is, the growing block view is probably closer to the commonsensical view than Presentism. Does this rule in favor of the growing block view?
- (iii) Why should commonsense be a *prima facie* sufficient ground for holding a metaphysical view?