

## That's Outrageous

by

JOHN TURRI

University of Waterloo

---

*Abstract:* I show how non-presentists ought to respond to a popular objection originally due to Arthur Prior and lately updated by Dean Zimmerman. Prior and Zimmerman say that non-presentism cannot account for the fittingness of certain emotional responses to things past. But presentism gains no advantage here, because it is equally incapable of accounting for the fittingness of certain other emotional responses to things past, in particular moral outrage.

*Keywords:* presentism, time, Arthur Prior, Dean Zimmerman, emotional fit

DO ONLY PRESENT THINGS EXIST? Here we understand “things” broadly to include objects, events and instants of time. Presentists answer “yes”. Non-presentists answer “no”.

One popular presentist argument traces back to Arthur Prior (1959), who objected to non-presentism. At that time non-presentism came packaged with an objectionable semantics of tensed discourse. Prior’s objection got traction in light of the objectionable semantics. And while non-presentists have introduced numerous improvements since Prior’s argument (see, e.g., Mellor, 1981), including abandoning the objectionable semantics, the spirit of Prior’s objection lives on. It is no longer concerned with inadequate semantics, but instead with the fittingness of certain emotional responses.

Prior wrote:

One says, e.g. “Thank goodness that’s over!”, and not only is this, when said, quite clear without any date appended, but it says something which it is impossible that any use of a tenseless copula with a date should convey. It certainly doesn’t mean the same as, e.g. “Thank goodness the date of the conclusion of that thing is Friday, June 15, 1954”, even if it be said then. (Nor, for that matter, does it mean “Thank goodness the conclusion of that thing is contemporaneous with this utterance”. Why should anyone thank goodness for that?) (1959, p. 17)

Dean Zimmerman picks up on the point, abstracting it from the more technical semantic dispute about tense:

When I notice that a headache, or some other painful episode, has become part of the past, I am relieved that this is so; and when a pleasant experience becomes past, I am often disappointed. If a

theory of time makes such changes in attitude utterly mysterious, we should have grave doubts about its adequacy. (2008, p. 214)<sup>1</sup>

If a past headache is every bit as real as a present one, then it is difficult to understand how *relief* is an appropriate emotional response to the headache's passing. Likewise if a past shoulder massage is every bit as real as a present one, then it is difficult to understand how *disappointment* is an appropriate emotional response to its passing.

This is not a technical objection about how best to interpret the meaning of tensed sentences. It has practical, ethical implications. It pertains to whether commonplace attitudes are fitting or appropriate. This matters to us. Getting the semantics of tensed discourse matters, especially to us theoreticians, and rightly so. But the propriety of common emotional responses matters more. And surely there is at least a presumption that common emotional responses, such as relief, are not simply misguided, as they apparently would be if presentism were false.

I will understand the basic argument here as follows:

#### *Presentist Argument*

1. If relief is an appropriate emotional response to a headache's passing, then presentism is true.
2. Relief is an appropriate emotional response to a headache's passing.
3. So presentism is true.

Zimmerman and others might put the matter slightly differently. For example, they might want to say "probably true" or even "more likely true than not" instead of "true". Present purposes allow us to ignore these details, as will become clear presently.

However good the Presentist Argument is, it affords the presentist no advantage, because the non-presentist can present an equally compelling analogous argument for non-presentism. My response to the Presentist Argument will thus differ drastically from that of Theodore Sider (2001, pp. 19–21), who argues, on the one hand, that Prior's method of reasoning is reduced to absurdity because it would lead us to posit irreducible *personal* and *spatial* facts, and on the other hand, that Prior's argument gets "the nature of attitudes to time" wrong. My response to the Presentist Argument differs even more drastically from that of J. J. C. Smart (2008, pp. 233–4), who argues that the problem is mainly "to do with statistical mechanics and cosmic thermodynamics".

---

<sup>1</sup> Zimmerman here adjudicates among versions of the A-theory of time, and argues that presentism (a version of A-theory) scores best. His main argument for A-theory is that it is just commonsense, and suffers no debilitating objections.

Moral outrage is an appropriate emotional response to past events. The Armenian Genocide still outrages us, and rightly so. Yet it is difficult to understand how *outrage* is an appropriate emotional response to something non-existent. It is appropriate to be equally outraged by yesterday's murder as by today's murder. But if yesterday's murder is non-existent, then it does not make good sense to be equally outraged by it. It is appropriate to be *significantly more outraged* by the Armenian Genocide than by today's murder. But it is very difficult to understand why that would be if the Armenian Genocide is non-existent.

This all suggests the following argument:

*Non-presentist Argument*

1. If outrage is an appropriate emotional response to past events, then non-presentism is true.
2. Outrage is an appropriate emotional response to past events.
3. So non-presentism is true.

This argument has all the same advantages as the Presentist Argument. Surely there is a presumption that common emotional responses, such as moral outrage, are not simply misguided, as they apparently would be if non-presentism were false. And this is not a technical issue – it cuts right to the heart of our lives as moral agents.

It might be objected that the Non-presentist Argument requires an implausible reading of “outrage at a past event”. Consider Smith, who is (in 2012) outraged at the Rwandan Genocide. What does it mean for Smith to be *outraged at the Rwandan Genocide*? Two options suggest themselves.

- A. Smith is outraged at the Rwandan Genocide, the event itself.
- B. Smith is outraged *that* the Rwandan Genocide occurred.

Presentists can accept Reading B because it does not commit them to the existence of anything non-present. According to Reading B, outrage is a relation between Smith and the presently existing, past-tensed proposition *it has been the case that many Rwandans are deliberately killed*. (Call this *propositional outrage*.) But presentists must reject Reading A because it commits us to the existence of a non-present event, which is the (non-propositional) object of outrage. (Call this *objectual outrage*.) So the Non-Presentist Argument's success depends on reading premise 2 after the manner of Reading A. But, the objection continues, Reading A is “very implausible”.<sup>2</sup> Such outrage is plausibly understood only as propositional outrage, not objectual outrage.

In response, I find neither reading implausible. The propositional reading does not seem required. My take here is broadly in line with the literature on emotions.

---

2 In the words of an anonymous referee, whom I thank for raising the objection.

The standard view is that emotions can take a wide range of possible objects, including propositions, qualities, persons and events (de Sousa, 2010). Consider this passage from Ronald de Sousa's entry on "Emotion" for the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*:

If someone is indignant, then there is some object *o* or proposition *p* such that the person is indignant at or with *o*, about *p* or that *p*, because of *p*, or in virtue of *p*.

Neither commonsense nor expert consensus restricts us to propositional outrage for things past. Yet presentism forces the propositional reading upon us for things past, whereas non-presentism does not. Of course, presentism does not entail that objectual outrage is impossible, so long as the event presently exists. But as soon as the event is past, if the current objection to the Non-Presentist Argument is correct, then your outrage at the event either vanishes, or suddenly transforms into a corresponding state of propositional outrage that it has been the case that the event occurs. This strikes me as counterintuitive, unfaithful to the phenomenology of emotional experience.

It might be objected that since some presentists already think that "being formerly real is analogous to being possibly real" (Markosian, 2004), they may understand our emotional response to past events the same way we understand our emotional response to fictional events.<sup>3</sup> This threatens premise 1 of the Non-presentist Argument. In response, I am sympathetic to the view that some emotional responses to fiction are appropriate, so I think this strategy is partly successful. It helps us understand how, if presentism is true, it could be appropriate to be outraged by the Armenian Genocide, even though it is non-existent. But it is not successful enough, because the intensity of outrage appropriately directed at the Armenian Genocide obviously cannot be matched by the intensity of outrage appropriately directed at any fictional event.

Finally, it might be objected that presentists can account for the propriety of outrage at past events by interpreting it as outrage over their present causal effects. That is, presentism can explain the propriety of outrage at past events, via the causal relation. This also threatens premise 1 of the Non-presentist Argument. In response, the objection fails for two reasons. On the one hand, there is no guarantee that an outrageous past event's *present* causal consequences will themselves merit outrage. It is even possible for the present causal consequences of an outrageous past event to be very good. For instance, humanity might be inspired to treat one another with renewed respect, and resolve *never* to let something like that happen again. That is laudable, not outrageous. On the other hand, not every past event whose present causal consequences are outrageous is itself outrageous. Klara Hitler's midwife

---

3 Markosian (2004) uses our understanding of "Ned admires Sherlock Holmes" to help presentists handle "Ned admires Socrates", so that it turns out to be "loosely speaking" true.

might have acted laudably in caring for her patient, when a miscarriage would otherwise have ensued. But no outrage is appropriately directed at the midwife's performance, neither in our time nor at past times when its causal consequences were at their ugly worst.

In conclusion, both non-presentism and presentism face *prima facie* problems of emotional fit. When presentists say, "Thank goodness that's over!", non-presentists should respond, "That's outrageous!" Presentism enjoys no obvious advantage here. One way to carry the dispute forward would be to see which side can accommodate a greater proportion of our emotional responses, either in kind or number. There would be no theory-neutral way of doing this – each side would, by necessity, explain appropriate emotional fit in light of their views on the nature of time. Absent a fairly specific theory of time, perhaps paired with a theory of emotions, any objection about emotional fit will be at best *prima facie* compelling. Alternatively, appeals to emotional fit might simply drop out of the picture, because neither side sees it as a winning issue.

### Acknowledgements

For helpful feedback and conversation, I am happy to thank Christopher Kane, Dan Korman and Angelo Turri.

### References

- MARKOSIAN, N. (2004) "A Defense of Presentism." In *Oxford Studies in Metaphysics*, Vol. 1, pp. 47–82. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- MELLOR, D. H. (1981) *Real Time*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- PRIOR, A. (1959) "Thank Goodness That's Over." *Philosophy* 34(128): 12–17.
- SIDER, T. (2001) *Four-Dimensionalism: An Ontology of Persistence and Time*. Oxford University Press.
- SMART, J. J. C. (2008) "The Tenseless Theory of Time." In T. Sider, J. Hawthorne and D. W. Zimmerman (eds), *Contemporary Debates in Metaphysics*, pp. 226–238. Oxford: Blackwell.
- DE SOUSA, R. (2010) "Emotion." In E. N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2010/entries/emotion/>.
- ZIMMERMAN, D. (2008) "The Privileged Present: Defending an 'A-Theory' of Time." In T. Sider, J. Hawthorne and D. W. Zimmerman (eds), *Contemporary Debates in Metaphysics*, pp. 211–225. Oxford: Blackwell.