

Options for the existentialist who is also a serious presentist

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Last time we talked about some of the pressures for the presentist who wants to say something about the grounding problem, and wants to make sense of most true-seeming sentences about the past, to endorse the view that objects can stand in relations at times which they don't exist. Now we want to know whether the existentialist who is also a serious presentist can say anything plausible about singular propositions which appear to be about formerly existing things.

1 Descriptivism about names for past objects

The obvious option is to retreat to descriptivism about names for formerly existing objects. Maybe while objects exist, names for them directly refer to those objects, but after they cease existing, the names take on the meanings of definite descriptions which single out the relevant objects.

Without further elaboration, this view is implausible for a few reasons:

1. Kripke's anti-descriptivist arguments appear to be as challenging with respect to descriptivism about names for past existents as with respect to descriptivism about presently existing things. (In fact, 'Aristotle' was one of his main examples of a rigid designator.) So, if the theorist in question has an answer to these arguments about names for former existents, why not apply this solution across the board, and just be a consistent descriptivist about all names?
2. If this view were true, names would constantly be changing their meaning without competent speakers having any way of knowing this, since typically a speaker will not, just in virtue of linguistic competence, know when the referent of a name goes

out of existence. We should get some explanation of why we never notice such meaning changes.

Here's Markosian's reply to the second objection:

Consider two possible worlds: the actual world, in which George W. Bush really exists, and a merely possible world – call it “ w_1 ” – in which some very powerful being is playing an elaborate trick on all of us by making it seem as if there is a man named “George W. Bush” when in fact there is not. Let the two versions of me in the two worlds have exactly the same intrinsic properties, and let my experiences in the two worlds be exactly alike, so that whenever I experience a television image of Bush in the actual world, I experience a qualitatively identical television image of (what appears to be) Bush in w_1 . Now, if you just look at my intrinsic properties, there is no difference between how I am in the actual world and how I am in w_1 . How is it possible, then, that there is such a big difference between me in the actual world and me in w_1 ? How is it possible that the actual me believes the singular proposition that Bush is president and the me in w_1 does not believe that proposition, when the two mes are so similar?

What should the Millian say about the meaning of the name ‘George Bush’ in w_1 ? Does this example help resolve the mystery of the ‘change of meaning’ when the referents of names go out of existence?

2 Gappy propositions

A non-descriptivist alternative would be to endorse the ‘gappy propositions’ view we discussed in connection with empty names. A strength of this view is that it fits better with a non-descriptivist treatment of names for presently existing objects.

But an immediate problem here is that it makes every ordinary predication involving a name for a past existent come out either false or lacking a truth-value. This is extremely counterintuitive.

The gappy proposition theorist can try to make things better by saying that while the semantic content of sentences involving the name is a gappy proposition, we can nonetheless use sentences involving the name to communicate or convey descriptive propositions which are about the formerly existing object.

A problem here is that we can substitute names of this sort, on the present view, without changing the proposition expressed by a sentence. So the sentences

Socrates was Greek.

Kant was Greek.

would express the same gappy proposition. So what could explain the fact that these sentences can be used to convey different propositions?

A possible answer: the difference in names. This only seems to make sense if the descriptive propositions conveyed are meta-linguistic. I think that it is implausible that the main thing we do with sentences like this is convey propositions which are partially about language.

3 Adams and thisnesses

Another sort of view — which can be thought of as a kind of descriptivism — says that sentences involving names express descriptions involving thisnesses — intuitively, the properties of being a given thing. Thisnesses are more intimately related to objects than are other properties — indeed, thisnesses cannot exist until the relevant objects do, on the account of Adams, ‘Time and thisness’ — so this might be a more palatable view to the Millian than other forms of descriptivism about names for formerly existing objects.

Markosian gives three objections to this view:

1. It does not handle singular propositions about future existing objects, since, on Adams’ view thisnesses don’t exist until the relevant object does.

Reply. I think that this is one of the real strengths of the view. Plausibly, it is impossible to have singular thoughts about an object without either having perceptual acquaintance with it or being connected via a language to someone who has. But no one has perceptual acquaintance with objects that don’t yet exist; so no one has singular thoughts about objects which no longer exist. One of the nice things about Adams’ view is that it arrives independently at the same conclusion.

2. Thisnesses could only be things like ‘the property of being identical to x ’, and presentists who are existentialists should not accept that properties of this sort can exist at times when x doesn’t.

Reply. Fair enough; we need to think of thisnesses as primitive rather than as having objects as constituents. I agree that this is somewhat odd, but perhaps not disqualifying.

3. Propositions involving thisnesses are not really singular propositions.

Reply. True. But they’re closer to singular propositions than any other descriptive propositions.

I could almost accept this view if we think of it as the view that sentences involving the name express Millian propositions while the object exists, and propositions involving the thisness afterwards. This seems somewhat natural to me, and I am much happier to accept thisnesses which can continue to exist after the object is gone than I am to accept Al-stye individual essences which could have existed without the individual existing.

However, I’m worried about the role the propositions play in the philosophy of perception, as well as in the philosophy of language. It is plausible that the contents of our perceptual

experiences are often Millian propositions; it would be very surprising if the contents of our perceptual experiences often included thisnesses. But there are cases in which we can perceptually experience an object after that object has ceased to exist. Do these cases force us to think that we can perceptually represent thisnesses?

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Conclusion: none of these options look great to me. In particular, I don't see that any of them, with the possible exception of Adams' view, both preserve the motivations for being an existentialist/Millian and avoid saying unacceptably implausible things. I think that, if you are a serious presentist, it might be reasonable on the basis of that commitment not to be an existentialist. Or, if you're pretty sure that existentialism is true, that might be a good reason not to be a serious presentist.