The conflict between presentism and existentialism

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1 Why presentism is a harder problem for the existentialist than actualism

As in our discussion of Al's argument against existentialism, we're concerned in our discussion of presentism not with the Russellian view of propositions per se, nor even with Millian versions of Russellianism, but rather with what is often taken to be a corollary of Millian versions of Russellianism: the existentialist idea that propositions expressed by sentences containing singular terms of direct reference cannot exist unless the referent of the term in question also exists.

Keeping this in mind, we can give the following argument against existentialism:

1. The proposition *that Socrates was a philosopher* is true (believed by me, expressed by the sentence 'Socrates was a philosopher', . . .).
2. If something has a property at t, it exists at t. (Serious Presentism)
3. The proposition *that Socrates was a philosopher* exists. (1,2)
4. Socrates does not exist. (Presentism)

C. The proposition *that Socrates was a philosopher* can exist even if Socrates does not. (3,4)

The conclusion of the argument seems to state the falsity of existentialism with respect to the proposition *that Socrates does not exist*; since the argument seems general, it seems that it will be capable of showing that existentialism is false with respect to all propositions about things which do not exist at all times.

There is a clear sense in which this argument is not as challenging as Al's argument against existentialism: the premises of this argument are not as clearly correct as the premises of his argument. Very few philosophers want to deny the claim that Socrates fails to exist in some possible worlds; but many philosophers are not presentists, and so, whether they're eternalists or friends of the 'growing block' view of time, will deny that Socrates fails to exist. Similarly, it seems crazy to claim that objects could have had properties without so much as existing; it sounds substantially less crazy to deny Serious Presentism and say that objects can have properties, or stand in relations, at times after they've ceased to exist.

However, there's also a very important sense in which this argument is a more challenging one that Al's: the solution I was pressing in response to that argument is unavailable here. In response to Al's argument, one can say that the propositions in question actually exist to be entertained and asserted by us, but that they can be true with respect to worlds according to which they themselves do not exist. But the present problem is not a problem about how propositions can be true at times according to which they do not exist. The problem is about how these propositions can exist now, to be entertained and asserted by us.

2 Existentialism and solutions to the grounding problem

2.1 Truths about Socrates

Consider the following defense of existentialism:

> It is not just the presentist who's committed to thinking that names like 'Socrates', as used by us now, must have referents. After all, we say lots of true things about Socrates, like that Socrates was Greek or that Socrates was a better philosopher than anyone now in Notre Dame's philosophy department. So either presentism is false and Socrates exists, or Serious Presentism is false and Socrates can have the property of being the referent of the name 'Socrates' at times when Socrates does not exist.

This line of argument is a way for the existentialist to try to show that his problems with singular propositions are problems for all presentists, since the demand that names have referents at the present time is just as pressing as the demand that they have contents. (This is another disanalogy with the 'actualism' argument, since there we did not have any pressure to assign a reference to 'Socrates' with respect to worlds in which Socrates does not exist.)

Whether this line of argument is successful will depend on whether the presentist can give an account of sentences like 'Socrates was Greek' which doesn't commit him to thinking that 'Socrates' has a reference at the time of utterance. One way for the presentist to do this is to see such sentences as having the form

was(Socrates is Greek)

which does not attribute to Socrates the property of having been Greek, but rather attributes to the proposition that Socrates is Greek the property of past truth. For this to make sense given Serious Presentism, we need only assume that the proposition exists — not that Socrates does. So this strategy apparently solves the above problem of truths about the past without helping out the existentialist.

2.2 The grounding problem and tensed properties

But things aren't quite this simple. A further problem — the 'grounding problem' — asks the presentist to explain what makes propositions about the past true, given that the past does not, according to the presentist, exist. To get this problem going, we need only assume that 'truth supervenes on being' — given that the present is the only time that exists, according to the presentist, what could be the supervenience base for the many true claims about the past?

The natural reply here is that things which exist now can instantiate 'tensed properties', like the property of our planet that it was such that Socrates was a philosopher here. This tensed property of the earth is one that it now instantiates, and so it can ground the truth of the proposition that Socrates was a philosopher.

However, there's a sense in which it seems od to admit tensed properties like this but deny the existence of tensed relations between presently existing things and things which no longer exist. After all, if it is true to say that the earth has the following tensed property

    _ is such that Socrates was a philosopher there.

then it seems odd to deny that the earth and Socrates stand in the following tensed relation:

    _ is such that _ was a philosopher there.

But if this is OK, then it is possible for presently existing things to stand in relations of a certain sort to things which no longer exist.

If this is possible, then at least an unrestricted version of Serious Presentism is false. If Serious Presentism is false, that would give the existentialist a way out of the problem under discussion.

2.3 Tensed relations and the problem of cross-temporal relations

Now consider another problem for the presentist: the problem of making sense of propositions which seem to attribute cross-temporal relations.

Consider, for example, the following examples from **?**:

Lewis admired Ramsey.

I am two years older than you were when you got promoted.

These cases clearly, on a face value reading, pose a problem for the presentist. One response to this problem is to deny that there are really any cross-temporal relations, and to try to explain apparent reference to cross-time relations in terms of synchronic relations holding between, for example, still-existing properties of past existents.

But it is not obvious that all apparent cases of cross-temporal relations can be handled in this way. Causal relations between events, for example, seem difficult.

? argues that cross-temporal relations provide another motivation for admitting the possibility of tensed relations.

A further argument that tensed relations are admissible is based on the need for 'cross-modal relations' to handle sentences like:

It is possible that I could have built a house bigger than the one I actually built.

which appear to say that a relation holds between objects in different worlds. This would seem to be a problem for Serious Actualism; depending on how sure you are that Serious Actualism is true, this might lead you to give up both Serious Actualism and Serious Presentism, or to think that something must be wrong with the present case for tensed relations.