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The Philosopher's Stone

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### Philosophy of Time Eternalism vs. Presentism

Philosophical Discussion Group, Armstrong State University

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# THE PHILOSOPHER'S STONE

## PHILOSOPHY OF TIME

### Eternalism vs. Presentism

#### Eternalism

Defended by Melissa Bates  
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In philosophy, there are two important views (though it must be stated that these are not the only views) on the nature of time: presentism and non-presentism. Megan will undoubtedly give a brilliant summary of presentism, so it is my duty to give some insight, although brief, into one of the opposing non-presentism views – eternalism - and its main principles.

*“Wherefore he [the Demiurge] resolved to have a moving image of eternity, and when he set in order the heaven, he made this image eternal but moving according to number, while eternity itself rests in unity, and this image we call time.”*

Plato, *Timaeus* 37d

Eternalism is the belief that all points in time (past, present, and future) are equally real. That which existed in the past, that which exists in the present, and that which will exist in the future all are fixed permanently (and eternally) as existing things – simply meaning they never go out of existence. This sounds a bit odd, but I will try my best to explain.

According to eternalists, time itself is intertwined into the 3-dimensional physical nature of the universe (known as four dimensionalism). The universe, by most scientific accounts, is eternal. As long as the physical structure of the universe exists, objects, regardless of their objective presence in the past, present, and future will eternally exist also. We all can think of someone or something from our past that still exists to us. Psychological prognoses such as PTSD, depression, and anxiety are all disorders in which we

have problems coming to terms with persons and/or experiences in our past, present, or future that still vividly exist.

But I can already hear the hardcore Presentist ask: What about objects that are not temporally present (here right now)? How can the eternalist view justify that non-present objects are still very much existent in the here and now?

From an eternalist perspective, existence itself is defined in an ontological sense (what exists in some form). This differs greatly from the presentist view that existence should only be regarded from a temporal perspective (what is present). So, it really boils down to which mode of “existence” we are relying on. Eternalism relies on a more acute classification of existence (specifically ontological) to support the existence of non-present objects. Furthermore, when speaking of equality amongst all points in time, as an eternalist we would affirm that the time in which Socrates did exist temporally (470-399 B.C) is as equally real this very moment you are reading this article as the day of my graduation in Fall 2015 (a year from now).

So we have nailed down that if an object existed temporally in the past, it still exists in the present, and will most assuredly exist in the future – albeit ontologically.

Another question that arises is: how do things which exist in the future exist now in the present (and in the past for that matter)? The eternalist will argue in favor of determinism (no free will, the future is already decided) as the prevailing reason for why the future existence of objects are equally real in all points in time. At first glance, free will seems to be incompatible with the eternalist’s view because how could something that may or may not come into existence due to its dependence on free choice be equally real when the choice itself has yet to be made? I am unsure how to approach this so I will leave it up to you all to chew on that one.

## Presentism: No Time Like The Present

Defended by Megan Netherland  
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We hear sometimes the idiom “there’s no time like the present”. What if there actually is no time BUT the present? Presentism is the position that the present is all there is. There is no past and no future, only the infinitesimally short moment we currently occupy. Getting rid of the future is an easy enough endeavor, but getting rid of the past is a more problematic enterprise. We all experience the past in the present moment do we not? We feel the ache of a loved one’s departure, and see the bruises from last week’s soccer match. How then does the past not exist?

Let us call the two relevant theories particular to this debate: the A theory and the B theory. The A theory suggests that positions in time can be ordered according to properties that they possess (being present, being one day past, being one day future). The B theory holds that time can be ordered by two-place relations (one day earlier than, simultaneous with). Presentism denies the B theory of time and follows the A theory which suggests that time is not like space, as the eternalists would have us believe, but time functions more like

modality. Presentism allows for objects to be temporally present rather than spatially present.

Presentism is referred to as the “common sense” theory of time. It is an easier pill to swallow than eternalism which holds that all moments in time exist simultaneously. It also allows human beings unrestricted free will.

Two problems arise with presentism. First there are no non-present objects in existence. For example, as soon as Plato died all singular propositions about him could no longer be believed. In addition, nothing can stand in relation to non-present objects. Not only can it not be believed that Plato was a philosopher, but I cannot say that I am a follower of Plato.

For the problem concerning relations between present objects and non-present objects we can consider the fact that things can be present temporally and not spatially. The influence of Plato is still temporally present whereas his body is not spatially present. I can therefore admit that I study Plato despite his not being present. In other words there are properties that are commonly associated with the name Plato such that when I hear the name Plato I am filled with a feeling of admiration.

### **Fall PDG MEETING SCHEDULE**

**Thurs., Sept. 11 @ 2pm in G226**

**Thurs., Oct. 16 @ 2pm in G226**

**Thurs., Nov. 13 @ 2pm in G226**

**Faculty Advisor: Dr. Erik Nordenhaug**

**Come Join Our Eternally Present Discussion or Our Presently Eternal Discussion. Given that one will not escape time either way, it is wise to reflect on that which one cannot escape if one cares about freedom.**

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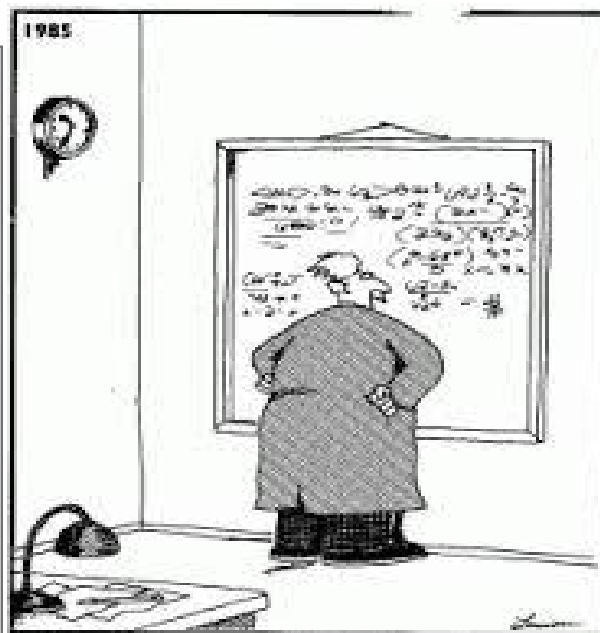
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Einstein discovers that time is actually money.