

On what will be: reply to Westphal

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Abstract Jonathan Westphal's recent paper attempts to reconcile the view that propositions about the future can be true or false now with the idea that the future cannot now be real. I attempt to show that Westphal's proposal is either unoriginal or unsatisfying. It is unoriginal if it is just the well-known eternalist solution. It is unsatisfying if it is instead making use of a peculiar, tensed truthmaking principle.

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1. Jonathan Westphal (2006) attempts to reconcile the view that 'contingent future-tense sentences express propositions which are determinately true, or determinately false, right now' with the idea that 'the future cannot *now* be real' (p. 5). Following Westphal, let's name the first thesis

Semantic Realism: Propositions about the future are true or false now.

Let's call the second thesis

No Future Now: No future facts exist now.

Semantic Realism may seem incompatible with No Future Now because surely some kind of truthmaker principle is true, something like

Truthmaker: For every true proposition, there exists a fact that makes it true.

Given No Future Now, we apparently have no truthmakers available now to make propositions about the future true now, as Truthmaker apparently requires we have.

My point in this paper is to show that Westphal's proposal for reconciling Semantic Realism with No Future Now is just the well-known and unoriginal (though satisfying) Eternalist solution, or else his solution adheres only to a *faux* truthmaking principle and so is seriously unsatisfying. My thesis is disjunctive because I'm not certain which of two possible proposals is Westphal's.

What sorts of things does Westphal take truthmakers to be? Sometimes he suggests that truthmakers are *facts*, as when he writes, "W and P are plainly different sentences, but they express just one proposition which is made true by just one fact" (p. 6). Note that 'fact' here cannot of course mean *true proposition*; rather, these facts have to be something like concrete, spatiotemporally-located beings in the world. In other places, Westphal suggests that truthmakers are *events*, as when he writes, "There you have two true propositions about the future, uttered before the events that would make them true had occurred" (p. 1). Now, arguably, for every event, there is a corresponding fact – the fact that the event occurs. But perhaps there are facts for which there are no corresponding events, and so perhaps there are more facts than events. Consequently, it will be easier for Westphal to find his desired truthmakers if we assume truthmakers to be facts, rather than events. Let us make this assumption.

2. According to Eternalism, past and future things exist as well as present things. If Westphal is an Eternalist, he has an easy, but not novel, explanation as to how Semantic Realism can be true. Propositions about the future can be true now because the facts that make them true really exist. There is even a sense in which they really exist *now*. The proposition expressed by 'the first person to be born in the 22nd century will be female' is true now (if it is true) because the first person to be born in the 22nd century really exists now – out there in the future, as it were – and she really has the property of being female, and so the fact of her being female is right now available to make the proposition true now.

But Westphal wonders in what sense it could be that future facts and events exist now:

it is obvious that the future cannot *now* be real, if that is taken to mean that *future* events are taking place *now*. And what else can it mean? (p. 5)

There is something else it can mean. An encyclopedia article by Ned Markosian (2002) draws a familiar and crucial distinction:

It might be objected that there is something odd about attributing to [an Eternalist] the claim that Socrates exists right now, since there is a sense in which that claim is clearly false. In order to forestall this objection, let us distinguish between two senses of 'x exists now'. In one sense, which we can call the *temporal location* sense, this expression is synonymous with 'x is present'. The [Eternalist] will admit that, in the temporal location sense of 'x exists now', it is true that no non-present objects exist right now. But in the other sense of 'x exists now', which we can call the *ontological* sense, to say that x exists now is just to say that x is now in the domain of our most unrestricted quantifiers, whether x happens to be present, like you and me, or non-present, like Socrates. When we attribute to [Eternalists] the claim that

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non-present objects like Socrates exist right now, we commit the [Eternalist] only to the claim that these non-present objects exist now in the ontological sense (the one involving the most unrestricted quantifiers).¹

This distinction yields two versions of No Future Now. There is No Future Now *in the temporal location sense*, or

No Future Temporally Now: No future facts are temporally located at the present time.

And there is No Future Now *in the ontological sense*, or

No Future Ontologically Now: No future facts are now in the domain of our most unrestricted quantifiers.

No Future Temporally Now is apparently what Westphal has in mind by No Future Now. But it is trivially true, and, as Markosian points out, Eternalists don't deny it. Eternalists deny No Future Ontologically Now and accept that future facts are now in the domain of our most unrestricted quantifiers.

So we see that the way Eternalism reconciles Westphal's two theses, while continuing to abide by a truthmaking requirement, is to disambiguate the second thesis, No Future Now. Only No Future *Ontologically* Now makes Semantic Realism hard to explain, but we can reject that thesis without doing violence to our intuition that no wholly future events can be taking place now. This intuition is respected by accepting – in fact, the intuition *just is* – No Future Temporally Now, a tautology that makes no trouble for Semantic Realism.

The attractiveness of the Eternalist solution can be made vivid with a familiar analogy. We all think that propositions about *other places* can be true *here*. So suppose it's cold on Mars. If we want to talk this way, we can say it is *true here* that it is cold on Mars. (Perhaps we'd want to talk this way to highlight the fact that, if we here say that it's cold on Mars, we here speak truly.) But, of course, the *fact* of its being cold on Mars doesn't exist here; that fact exists around where Mars is (given our assumed ontology of facts). But that doesn't matter. For a proposition to be true *here*, it has only to be that the fact that makes it true exists at some place or other.

According to Eternalists, the same goes for time. For a proposition to be true *now*, it has only to be that the fact that makes it true exists at some time or other.

It is worth noting that our Truthmaker principle above is ambiguous in the same way No Future Now was, and that Eternalists will accept Truthmaker *in the ontological sense*, i.e.,

Ontological Truthmaker: For every true proposition, there exists in the domain of our most unrestricted quantifiers a fact that makes it true.

Since the only version of No Future Now accepted by Eternalists is the temporal location version, and the version of Truthmaker accepted by Eternalists is the

¹ The distinction drawn here is drawn in many places, including Crisp (2004), which Westphal cites. Crisp writes, "To say of x that it exists in this sense is to claim merely that our most inclusive quantifiers range over x" (2004, p. 16).

ontological version, we cannot, without equivocation, use these two principles to generate a problem for Semantic Realism. Puzzle solved. And it is solved without denying that 'it is obvious that the future cannot *now* be real, if that is taken to mean that *future* events are taking place *now*' (p. 5).

Westphal's solution might just be this. When he criticizes the denial of No Future Now, his target is the denial of the trivially true, Eternalism-compatible No Future Temporally Now. Since he never discusses No Future Ontologically Now, I don't know what his view is about it. But one reason to think that Westphal would join the Eternalist in rejecting No Future Ontologically Now is that he says explicitly 'I certainly did not mean to endorse presentism' (p. 4), which is the thesis that only present objects are in the domain of our most unrestricted quantifiers. The only viable alternative to Presentism and Eternalism is the Growing Block Theory, the thesis that only past and present objects are in the domain of our most unrestricted quantifiers. Like Presentists, Growing Block Theorists accept No Future Ontologically Now. But Westphal rejects the Growing Block Theory too. From among these three alternatives (plus some options Westphal lists that no one has ever held), Westphal says that 'Eternalism ... is the one closest to the truth' (p. 5).²

3. However, other passages suggest that Westphal's proposal is not the Eternalist one and instead rests on an acceptance of a peculiar sort of truthmaking principle. In a passage quoted by Westphal, Michael Dummett pledges his allegiance to a conventional sort of truthmaking principle: 'a proposition can be true only if there is something in virtue of which it is true' (Dummett, 2004, p. 74). Westphal writes that his own solution to our puzzle

calls for an amendment of this claim. It is to read instead, 'A proposition can be true only if there is or was something in virtue of which it is true, *or if there will be something in virtue of which it is true.*' (p. 4)

This suggests that Westphal would reject the ontological interpretation of Truthmaker and accept in its place:

Tensed Truthmaker: For every true proposition, there presently exists, did exist, or will exist a fact that makes it true.

So Westphal's strategy, under this interpretation, is to water down the truthmaking requirement, while still adhering to the basic truthmaking idea. According to the watered-down principle, to make some proposition true, it's enough that there merely *will be* a fact that makes it true. The fact need not exist now, even in the ontological sense – that is, the fact need not now be in the domain of our most unrestricted quantifiers.

Replacing Truthmaker with Tensed Truthmaker would indeed render Semantic Realism compatible with No Future Now (under either the temporal or the

² Westphal claims that some philosophers have endorsed some of the other options he lists. For instance, he claims that McTaggart's view is that neither past, future, nor *present* objects exist. But, to use Quine's terminology, this confuses ideology (A-Theory vs. B-Theory) with ontology (Eternalism vs. Presentism vs. Growing Block Theory vs. ...). I conjecture that Westphal's reluctance to wholeheartedly embrace Eternalism rests on this confusion.

ontological interpretation). But it is cheating. A principle like Tensed Truthmaker simply does not capture the “truthmaking intuition.” It doesn’t capture what we have in mind when we demand that for every truth there must be something in reality (something in the domain of our most unrestricted quantifiers) that makes it true.³ This is why many philosophers feel the need for future objects now to be in the domain of their most unrestricted quantifiers. If Tensed Truthmaker counts as a legitimate truthmaking principle, then we have lost the distinction between those who want to abide by a genuine truthmaker requirement and those who think truthmaking unimportant – those who don’t mind brute, ‘ungrounded’ propositions, truths that ‘float free’ of the world, with nothing to make them true (Sider, 2001, p. 36).

To see that Tensed Truthmaker is a truthmaking principle in name only, consider an analogy. Suppose I want to help myself to all the benefits of the modal realism of David Lewis without having to believe in the real existence of all the concrete possible worlds. I don’t want to be forced to have flesh and blood talking donkeys in my ontology, but I would still like the sentence ‘there could have been a talking donkey’ to come out true. And, since I don’t like the sound of truth floating free from being, I feel obligated to pay lip service to some kind of truthmaker principle. So I offer you:

Modalized Truthmaker: For every true proposition, there exists, *or could have existed*, a fact that makes it true.

And I explain the truth of ‘there could have been a talking donkey’ as follows. I say that my truthmaking principle doesn’t require there really to be talking donkeys in the domain of my most unrestricted quantifiers to explain why it is true that there could have been a talking donkey. The principle requires only that there could have existed the fact of there being a talking donkey. And of course this fact could have existed, for there could have been a talking donkey. So I can that easily be a semantic realist about modal propositions without having to admit any merely possible objects into my ontology.

Clearly, this is cheating in the modal case. Someone who takes this line is really just flouting the truthmaker requirement. He’s just accepting ungrounded, brute modal propositions. If Westphal is appealing to Tensed Truthmaker to solve our puzzle, I think he is cheating in the same way. He’s just accepting brute temporal propositions with nothing in the domain of his most unrestricted quantifiers to make them true.

I conclude that Westphal’s proposal for reconciling Semantic Realism with No Future Now is unoriginal if it is the Eternalist solution, and unsatisfying if it is the proposal just described.

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³ Given, that is, that the tensed elements of Tensed Truthmaker aren’t analyzed away, in the manner in which an Eternalist would do it. If it is, then we are back at the Eternalist solution.

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