

The real price of the dead past: a reply to Forrest and to Braddon-Mitchell

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David Braddon-Mitchell's recent paper begins, 'Many philosophers have found a theory of time that shares features of four dimensionalism with an account of the genuine passage of time to be attractive' (2004: 199). I was once one such philosopher. But then I read the rest of Braddon-Mitchell's paper and was convinced that this combination of views is untenable.¹ It implies that it is almost certainly not now now.²

Braddon-Mitchell's particular target is the Growing Block Theory, according to which the past is real, the future is not, and the present is to be identified with that hyperplane of space that is the leading edge of the growing four-dimensional block that is our universe. If the Growing Block Theory is true, then we have no reason to think that *this* moment, the moment we are all in right now, is the present moment. For all we know, some moment in the thirty-seventh millennium is currently at the leading edge, and so it is the real present, you and I being ancient history. Our evidential situation is no better than the current one of Caesar, crossing the Rubicon in 49 BC, believing falsely that he is doing so in the present. But (to conclude the argument) scepticism about whether one exists in the present is absurd. Any view that allows such scepticism is unacceptable.

Braddon-Mitchell considers a way, due to Peter Forrest (forthcoming), for the Growing Block Theorist to stop this argument: the Dead Past Hypothesis. According to the Dead Past Hypothesis, life and consciousness are 'by-product[s] of the causal frisson that takes place on the borders of being and non-being' (Braddon-Mitchell 2004: 201). On this view, only those beings on the leading edge of the universe, and so in the objective present, can be conscious and living. The Growing Block Theorist can then block the road to scepticism by deriving knowledge that one is in the present from knowledge that one is conscious. We are different from Caesar because he's now a Zombie and we're not.

¹ I should have been convinced earlier, by Bourne (2002), who, as Forrest (2004) points out, makes more or less the same point as Braddon-Mitchell.

² On the target view, the word 'now' and other temporal expressions are systematically ambiguous. In what follows, I refrain from disambiguating explicitly, but the context should suffice to make the meaning clear.

Braddon-Mitchell rejoins that, given Special Relativity, Forrest's evasion of scepticism about the present comes at the cost of scepticism about other minds. For all we know, our seemingly present colleagues are in fact in the past, and so are Zombies like Caesar. Forrest (2004) has counterattacked, arguing that, on the contrary, Special Relativity actually lends support to, rather than casts doubt on, his own position.

I want to take a different tack, an armchair rather than an a posteriori attack on Forrest's Dead Past defence of the Growing Block Theory. The Dead Past Hypothesis undercuts the main reason for preferring the Growing Block Theory over its chief 'genuine passage', or A-theory, rival – a rival which itself is immune to scepticism about the present. The A-theory rival is Presentism, the doctrine that only present objects exist. The main advantage of the Growing Block Theory over Presentism is supposed to be that the Growing Block Theory provides truth-makers for statements about the past. Presentists have had to engage in a dizzying array of semantic and metaphysical gymnastics to explain the truth and/or meaningfulness of simple statements like 'Socrates was a philosopher', 'I admire Socrates', and 'There have been two kings named Charles'. And the jury is still out on whether the Presentists have succeeded. (For the state of the art, see the papers by Lewis, Markosian, and Keller in Zimmerman 2004, from which these sample sentences were drawn.)

The Growing Block Theory avoids problems concerning talk and thought about the past because it accepts the real existence of past objects, objects that really have properties and really stand in relations (to each other and to present objects), and over which we present folk really can quantify. But combine the Growing Block Theory with the Dead Past Hypothesis and the problems return. For surely the following statements are true:

- (CC) Caesar was conscious when he crossed the Rubicon.
- (SA) Socrates was alive when he was sentenced to death.

And one would have thought that (CC) and (SA) are made true in just the way the following are made true:

- (CW) Caesar was wet when he crossed the Rubicon.
- (SF) Socrates was fat when he was sentenced to death.

But the Dead Past defence of the Growing Block Theory makes this impossible. Either the first two sentences are false, or if they can be shown to be true, they are not made true in the way the final two are made true. They are made true only thanks to some of the semantic and metaphysical

gymnastics Presentists train for but Growing Block Theorists thought they could avoid.³

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