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### Presentism and the objection from being-supervenience

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# PRESENTISM AND THE OBJECTION FROM BEING-SUPERVENIENCE

Brian Kierland and Bradley Monton

In this paper, we show that presentism—the view that the way things are is the way things presently are—is not undermined by the objection from being-supervenience. This objection claims, roughly, that presentism has trouble accounting for the truth-value of past-tense claims. Our demonstration amounts to the articulation and defence of a novel version of presentism. This is *brute past presentism*, according to which the truth-value of past-tense claims is determined by the past understood as a fundamental aspect of reality different from things and how things are.

## I. Introduction

Ordinary thought about time endorses the following three claims:

- (I) Some past-tense claims are true, and some are false.
- (II) Past-tense claims depend on the past, and not at all on the way things presently are, for their truth-value.
- (III) The way things are is the way things presently are.

(III) is the thesis of *presentism* [Hinchliff 1996: 123].<sup>1</sup> It entails the following:

- (III\*) The only things that exist are presently existing things.

If the way things are is the way things presently are, then only present things can exist.<sup>2</sup>

There is a certain philosophical objection to the conjunction of (I), (II), and (III). Put simply, it goes like this. According to (II), past-tense claims depend for their truth-value upon the past. But, according to (III), the past

<sup>1</sup>Note that (III) is just a claim about things and how they are; it does not say that reality is exhausted by how things are. This will be important in the following sections. Also, strictly, the formulation of presentism and other principles discussed in this paper should additionally refer to stuff and the way stuff is; but, for brevity, we leave out such references.

<sup>2</sup>Unless, that is, past things can exist without existing in any 'way', i.e., exist entirely without features. But we will set this possibility aside. Sometimes presentism is formulated directly in terms of (III\*); but we prefer the formulation in (III).

doesn't exist; only the present does. Thus, there is no anchor in reality for the truth-value of past-tense claims. Hence, past-tense claims cannot be said to be true or false. But this contradicts (I).

(I) and (II) have parallels in the case of the future:

(I<sub>f</sub>) Some future-tense claims are true, and some are false.

(II<sub>f</sub>) Future-tense claims depend on the future, and not at all on the way things presently are, for their truth-value.

An objection similar to the above could then be given against the conjunction of (I<sub>f</sub>), (II<sub>f</sub>), and (III). However, some will not find this objection worrisome. Some find it plausible that there is an important metaphysical asymmetry between past and future that comes along with the asymmetry constituted by the arrow of time: while the past exists, the future does not [Broad 1923: chap. 2; Tooley 1997]. These philosophers will either find (I<sub>f</sub>) implausible (future-tense claims *cannot* be said to be true or false) or (II<sub>f</sub>) implausible (determinism means future-tense claims depend on the present for their truth-value). Since we intend to remain neutral upon this issue about the future, we focus simply on the case of the past.

In this paper, we attempt to show that presentism is not undermined by the objection explained above. We ourselves are not yet fully convinced by this attempt, which involves offering (as we see it) the best possible defence of a certain version of presentism. Nonetheless, we think it important that, even if it ultimately fails, such a defence of this version of presentism be represented in the literature. So, for this purpose, in this paper, we take on the role of whole-hearted supporters of the view.

## II. The Being-Supervenience Principle

The philosophical objection to the conjunction of (I), (II), and (III) given in Section I contains a hidden premise. (III) denies the existence of past things. (II) denies that the past is a matter of present things or how things presently are. However, (II) and (III) do not, by themselves, deny that the past is an aspect of reality. Maybe the past is not a matter of things and how things are.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup>Two notes. First, if it weren't that presentism is often said to deny the existence of the past, we would be happy, here and in what follows, to speak in terms of 'the existence of the past'. As we see it, the presentist who accepts (II) need not deny the existence of the past. She will deny that the past is a matter of things or how things are since, by her presentist lights, these are exhausted by present things and how things presently are. However, it is open to her to understand the existence of the past in some other way. In that case, should she say that the past presently exists? We don't see why not, since the present existence of the past would not be a matter of present things or the way things presently are; cf. Section VIII. (It is for this reason that our later proposal, which adverts to the idea of a brute past, cannot be accused of Meinongianism, more exactly, of postulating a past which *is* in some sense, but does not *exist*. We consider a somewhat different Meinongian worry in Section VII.) However, since this point has gone unnoticed, we will speak in the possibly-less-misleading terms of 'the past as one aspect of reality'.

Second, in case it is not already clear, we are not using the term 'thing' in such a way that it applies to all that can be referred to or quantified over. We follow Quine in using the term 'exists' in such a fashion, but believe that there are (or at least might be) fundamental metaphysical distinctions to be made among kinds of existents. To partly justify such usage: surely we shouldn't, at least in one important sense, call properties

So what is the hidden premise? Again, (II) denies that the past is a matter of present things or how things presently are. So, to infer from (III)—the claim that the way things are is the way things presently are—that the past (so understood) is not an aspect of reality, we need a metaphysical thesis which makes a restrictive claim about what reality consists in. We suggest the following, what we shall call the *Reality Principle*:

(RP) Reality consists, and only consists, in things and how things are.

Since (III) asserts that the way things are is the way things presently are, (III) and (RP) together entail that reality consists, and only consists, in present things and how they presently are. This means that, insofar as the past is an aspect of reality, it has to be understood in terms of present things or the way things presently are. So adding (II) to (III) and (RP), we get the consequence that there is no anchor in reality for the truth-value of past-tense claims. Thus, past-tense claims cannot be said to be true or false. And, once again, that contradicts (I)—the claim that some past-tense claims are true, and some are false.<sup>4</sup>

The Reality Principle has a semantic equivalent, what we shall call the *Being-Supervenience Principle*:

(BSP) Truth supervenes on things and how things are.

Following others, we sloganize this as: truth supervenes on being [Bigelow 1996: 38; Lewis 1999a: 206]. It should be clear enough why we say that (BSP) is the semantic equivalent of (RP). If (RP) is true, then things and how things are exhausts the supervenience base for truth. And if (BSP) is true, then reality must be exhausted by things and how things are. Since principles like (BSP) are more commonly discussed, we shall hereafter work with (BSP) rather than (RP).

So (I), (II), (III), and (BSP) are together inconsistent; we call this the *problem of being-supervenience*. Construed as an argument against Presentism—(I), (II), and (BSP) as premises and not-(III) as conclusion—we can call it the *objection from being-supervenience*. Since nearly all philosophers who have considered this and similar issues find (I) and (BSP) undeniable, they are led to reject either (II) or (III). *Non-presentism* denies (III); the most plausible version of non-presentism is *eternalism*.

<sup>4</sup>'things', even if they exist, i.e., are properly referred to and quantified over. What, then, distinguishes things? This is a difficult question to answer, much in the same way as it is difficult to answer the question what distinguishes abstract from concrete existents generally. It might be thought that the questions are the same, things being concrete existents, but this is not obvious. The idea of a brute past—something to which our later proposal adverts—seems to be an idea of a concrete existent which is not a thing.

<sup>4</sup>This is more or less the line of thought elaborated in Keller [2004: 85–9]. However he also applies the line of thought to the case of the future (see the penultimate paragraph of our Section I); he doesn't highlight (II) in the same way he highlights (I) and (III); and he uses something quite like (BSP) rather than (RP) (see below in the main text).

*Being-supervenience presentism* rejects (II); according to it, the truth-value of past-tense claims supervenes on present things or the way things presently are.<sup>5</sup> There are two important versions of being-supervenience presentism. On one version, the truth-value of past-tense claims supervenes on present *things* of a special sort, namely present facts (or states of affairs) ‘about the past’; presumably, this is the sort of being-supervenience presentism a fan of primitive facts (or states of affairs) would prefer.<sup>6</sup> On the other version, the truth-value of past-tense claims supervenes on how present things are; the most important instance of this version is Bigelow’s view that the past is a matter of global properties presently possessed by the world [Bigelow 1996: 46–8].<sup>7</sup>

Along with many others, we find the cost of being-supervenience Presentism—its rejection of (II)—not to be worth its gain—its preservation of (III), i.e., presentism. It is extremely intuitive that past-tense claims depend for their truth-value on the past, and not at all on present things or the way things presently are. *If* saving this claim requires countenancing the existence of past things, *then* we say: three cheers for past things! But we reject the antecedent of this conditional, since we think (BSP) is open to challenge.

### III. Truth-Making and Being-Supervenience

So the philosophical objection to the conjunction of (I), (II), and (III) depends on the assumption of (BSP). Before challenging this assumption, we should say a few more words about being-supervenience.

<sup>5</sup>Being-supervenience presentism is more or less what Keller [2004: 89] calls ‘Truthmaker-preserving presentism’.

<sup>6</sup>For a comprehensive view on which reality is a bunch of facts (or states of affairs), see Armstrong [1997], though Armstrong himself is no presentist. Note that we here apply the label ‘thing’ to facts, although perhaps we shouldn’t, given how we use this term; cf. the second note in note 3. Here we think it’s simply best to follow the relevant theorist’s own usage, especially given standard definitions of the term ‘truth-maker’, such as the ones we offer in Section III. Still, if facts are not things in *our* sense, it may seem that, in the next main text paragraph, we too quickly dismiss presentism which appeals to primitive facts ‘about the past’. But see the discussion at the very end of Section VIII.

<sup>7</sup>Bigelow [1996: 46] attributes to Lucretius the view that the past (and future) is a matter of properties presently possessed by particular things. Keller [2004: 99–101] discusses a view according to which the past (and future) is a matter of properties presently possessed by fundamental particles.

Bigelow [1996: 37] presents another worry for presentism: *the problem of relations*. It is very intuitive that a relation can only hold between co-existing things. But then how can presentism account for ordinary claims to the effect that one thing, at one time, bears a relation to another thing, at another time? According to presentism, things at different times are never co-existing.

Bigelow formulates the intuitive principle a bit differently: relations are existence entailing. We prefer our formulation; here’s why. Bigelow connects the problem of relations to (BSP). If truth supervenes on being, then relational truth supervenes on being, and so relations must be existence entailing. But this failure to recognize that the problem of relations is more specific than the general problem of being-supervenience. We could reject the claim that truth supervenes on being, and grant (as we suggest later) that the past is a fundamental aspect of reality (not to be understood in terms of things or how things are); but the problem of relations would not have gone away. There would be no general problem with past-tense truths, but there would be a specific problem with past-tense cross-temporal relational truths. Even if the past is fundamental, there is still a problem so long as relations can only hold between co-existing things; according to presentism, there still would be no time at which the two things *were* co-existing.

We believe that the specific problem of relations can be solved, but our target in this paper is only the more general problem of being-supervenience. For a presentation of the problem of relations with special emphasis on cross-temporal spatial relations, see Sider [2001: 25–35].

In the literature, there is debate about *truth-makers*, defined as the following [Lewis 1999a: 202]:

(TM) *T* is a truth-maker for proposition *P* if and only if *T* is a thing whose existence entails that *P* is true.

In the language of possible worlds, this amounts to [Lewis 2003: 28]:

(TM\*) *T* is a truth-maker for proposition *P* if and only if *T* is a thing such that every world in which *T* exists is a world in which *P* is true.

The debate (or at least one of them) has to do with what we shall call the *Truth-Making Principle*:

(TMP) Every true proposition has a truth-maker.<sup>8</sup>

Many philosophers find this problematic. Negative existentials pose one obvious problem: what *thing* makes it true that there are no unicorns? But ordinary intrinsic predications also pose a problem: Brian's existence does not make it true that he is 5'9", since he could have been taller or shorter (and simply adding the existence of a height property doesn't help) [Lewis 1999a: 204].

Some defend (TMP) by pointing to facts (or states of affairs): the fact that there are no unicorns makes it true that there are no unicorns, and the fact that Brian is 5'9" makes it true that Brian is 5'9".<sup>9</sup> Now, no one denies that ordinary fact-assertions are often true. But we, along with many other philosophers, deny that such claims wear their significance on their face. To assert the existence of the fact that there are no unicorns is nothing more than to assert that there are no unicorns [Lewis 1999b: 216–7]. We maintain that there strictly are no such *things* as facts, and thus there are no facts available to be truth-makers.<sup>10</sup>

Those who reject (TMP) for such reasons nonetheless find the Being-Supervenience Principle plausible, which we here repeat:

<sup>8</sup>Sometimes the principle is restricted to contingently true propositions.

<sup>9</sup>See Armstrong [1997: 116–19] for this sort of view about intrinsic predications. Armstrong [1997: 134–5] deals with negative propositions (including negative existentials), not by appealing directly to negative facts (or states of affairs), but by appealing to totality facts (or states of affairs), something like: the (second-order) fact that such-and-such facts exhaust all the (first-order) facts about objects. Then, so long as these (first-order) facts about objects do not include any of the form *o's being a unicorn*, this (second-order) totality fact makes true the negative existential proposition that there are no unicorns. This does not affect the point to follow in the main text; to assert the existence of this totality fact is nothing more than to assert something like: (for all objects *x*, *x* = *a* or *b* or *c* or ...) & (for all properties/relations *Y*, *Y* = *F* or *G* or *H* or ...) & *a* is *F* & *a* is not *G* & ... & *b* is not *F* & *b* is *G* & ... & *a* bears *H* to *b* & ...; note how use of '...' in specifying this assertion corresponds to use of 'such-and-such' in specifying the totality fact. Can one make this assertion without quantifying over properties? One could just omit the second clause, assuming (a) '*F*', '*G*', '*H*', etc., exhaust all meaningful predicates, and (b) what can be meaningfully predicated is a logically necessary matter.

<sup>10</sup>For an attempt to solve the problem of intrinsic predications on behalf of those who endorse (TMP), one which does not appeal to facts, see Lewis [2003: 29–32].

(BSP) Truth supervenes on things and how things are.<sup>11</sup>

The problems noted for (TMP) are not problems for (BSP). The truth that there are no unicorns supervenes on things and how things are, simply because there are no things which are unicorns. And the truth that Brian is 5'9" supervenes on things and how things are, simply because the thing Brian is 5'9".

So should we accept (BSP)?

#### IV. Questioning the Being-Supervenience Principle

We believe it is far from obvious that we should.

(BSP) is not intuitively plausible, although it can *seem* otherwise. (BSP) seems plausible if it is approached by way of considering the problems we have noted for (TMP). But this really is just to note that (BSP) is intuitively *superior to* (TMP): (BSP) better accords with our intuitive sense of how the truth of negative existentials and intrinsic predications are to be accounted for. But (BSP) cannot be said to be intuitively plausible *until* we have measured it against our intuitive sense of how truths of *all kinds* are to be accounted for.

Of course, in doing metaphysics, we consult not just intuition, but also science. So, more generally, we can say: principles like (BSP) are to be evaluated *after* we have given the overall best possible intuition- and science-respecting truth-conditions of claims of *all kinds*. *First* we see what we need to countenance in giving such truth-conditions, and *then* we offer our generalization concerning that upon which all truth supervenes.<sup>12</sup>

So is (BSP) the best such generalization? It is far from clear that it is. Consider this alternative generalization, what we shall call the *Qualified Being-Supervenience Principle*:

(QBSP) Truth supervenes on things, how things are, and the past about things and how things were.

This can be sloganized as: truth supervenes on being and past being. It is far from clear that (BSP) is superior to (QBSP).

One mark against (BSP) is, we believe, simply that (BSP) contradicts the conjunction of (I), (II), and (III). This mark against (BSP) should come as no surprise. (BSP) is formulated by ignoring issues of time, and then when it is applied to issues of time, we find that—lo and behold!—one of our intuitive views must be rejected.<sup>13</sup> However, were we to proceed properly—i.e.,

<sup>11</sup>This is sometimes also called a 'truth-making' principle [Keller 2004: 85]. But given how the term 'truth-maker' is usually officially defined (i.e., as we have defined it in the main text), we prefer to call it a 'being-supervenience' principle.

<sup>12</sup>This explains an ideal which, we admit, cannot be fully satisfied in practice – there are just too many kinds of claims (and too much science). But in doing our best to satisfy this ideal, we clearly need (and can) pay attention to our intuitions about time.

<sup>13</sup>Compare how swiftly Lewis [1999a: 207] rejects Prior's presentism using his assumption that truth supervenes on being.

by considering the best possible intuition- and science-respecting truth-conditions of claims of *all kinds*—then we would not be moved to accept (BSP) so quickly in the first place.

Of course, this will not move anyone who does not agree that (III), i.e., presentism, captures our intuitive view of time. But those who offer the objection from being-supervenience against presentism need to make a *positive* case for (BSP). Some of the other objections against presentism, such as its being inconsistent with special relativity, may amount to such a positive case [Sider 2001: 42–52]; for instance, some of these objections may undermine important alternatives to (BSP), such as (QBSP).<sup>14</sup> But then there is no *independent* objection forthcoming from the problem of being-supervenience.

So, as we see it, there is no independent objection here given the possibility of some sort of thing/property/time metaphysics. According to such metaphysics, the past is an aspect of reality, but it cannot be reduced to *things* or the *properties* they possess (i.e., how these things are). Call this *brute past presentism*; from here on out, in speaking of a ‘brute past’, we have in mind a past which cannot be so reduced. On this view, then, what is the past? It is what *has happened*: what things existed and how they *were*.<sup>15</sup> But what is that? To ask that question is to presuppose that the past must be explainable in other terms. And this presupposition may simply be false.

## V. Clarifying Brute Past Presentism

Although, given what we just said, we don’t think we can positively characterize the brute past in a reductive fashion, we can say more about how we generally conceive of it and the role it plays vis-à-vis claims about the past.

The brute past has an intrinsic nature. Given what we say next, we like to think of this intrinsic nature in terms of the past having a certain ‘shape’. This shape does not consist in a structure of things having properties and standing in relations to one another. The past is an aspect of reality, even though no past things are. How can this be? There is no reductive explanatory answer to this question. The crucial feature of brute past presentism is that it postulates a *sui generis* metaphysical category, one independent of things and how they are.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>14</sup>There is also the more specific problem of relations; cf. note 7.

<sup>15</sup>At least, this is one aspect of the past. We do not claim to have fully carried out the project we describe earlier in this section.

<sup>16</sup>In line with the general injunction to distinguish meta-language from object language, we must here be careful to distinguish how we talk when making such philosophical claims—a way of talking which attempts to be as metaphysically perspicuous as possible—from how people talk when making ordinary claims. We postulate a brute past as the overall best way of, for example, making sense of the truth of the ordinary claim ‘Socrates existed’. It seems to us that, when it comes to ordinary ways of talking, someone could quite properly infer ‘Past things are an aspect of reality’ from the truth of this claim. Then how can we deny that, unlike the past, past things are not an aspect of reality? Engaging in metaphysics and so talking in philosophical fashion, we deny that, in addition to things like Ted Sider and the Sears Tower, reality also includes Socrates and the World Trade Center buildings, things which just happen to be past rather than present. Rather, the past is a brute aspect of reality, its shape makes true the ordinary claim ‘Socrates existed’, and ordinary ways of talking simply allow inference of ‘Past things are an aspect of reality’ from this.

The shape of the past is what makes past-tense claims true. Indeed (at least now thinking of claims as propositions), the shape of the past necessitates the truth-values of past-tense claims. But this is unobjectionable because not distinctive. Since propositions possess their semantic contents essentially, all truth-making is a necessary matter in this sense; for example, Brian's height necessitates that the proposition 'Brian is 5'9"' is true. *How* can the shape of the past make past-tense claims true, if this shape is not a structure of past things? There is no answer to this question (as there is no answer to any question of this kind) beyond what we've already discussed: we think our view is the overall best intuition- and science-respecting account of what determines the truth-value of past-tense claims. In other words, we think the best view of what past-tense claims are about (in a truth-conditional sense) is that they are about the shape of the past.

People know about the shape of the past just as they know about the truth of past-tense claims; this is a direct consequence of its being the shape of the past that makes past-tense claims true. So, for example, archeological evidence that the Mayans made wooden wheelbarrows is simultaneously evidence for the past having a certain (partial) shape. Of course, we have no independent, metaphysically perspicuous language for describing this shape (and we don't propose to introduce one), but that does not matter. So our evidence for there being a brute past with such a shape is philosophical in nature, while our evidence for the specific shape of the past is of the standard historical sort.

Although it follows from what we've already said, we should emphasize that, e.g., Socrates's having been a philosopher is not metaphysically independent of the shape of the past; rather, there is nothing more to Socrates's having been a philosopher than the past's having a certain (partial) shape. So there are no worries that (however impossible or inconceivable) a powerful demon might change the shape of the past (or even replace it with a differently shaped 'past\*'), with the result that brute past presentism entails that 'Socrates was a philosopher' is false (since, according to it, the shape of the past determines the truth-value of past-tense claims) even if Socrates was a philosopher. As on any view, if a powerful demon changes the past (however that change is understood on the view in question), then not only will some claims like 'Socrates was a philosopher' turn out to have different truth-values, but things themselves will turn out to have been different, e.g., it will turn out that Socrates wasn't a philosopher.

## VI. Is Accepting a Brute Past Cheating?

Maybe the possibility of principles like (QBSP) are not really ignored, and the core thought is simply that it and similar principles are so obviously unacceptable as not to be worth considering seriously. So maybe, all along, the objection from being-supervenience has rested on some such obvious difficulty. In this and the next two sections, then, we consider a

few objections to brute past presentism of the ‘obviously unacceptable’ sort.<sup>17</sup>

It may be claimed that brute past presentism falls to this objection: postulating the existence of a past unexplainable in other terms is cheating. Sometimes, it is said that presentism cheats because past-tense truths then ‘float free’ of reality.<sup>18</sup> But such truths do not ‘float free’ if (QBSP) is true; in that case, they supervene on the past about things and how things were. It could be said that such truths then ‘float free’ of being. But that would be worrisome only were (BSP) true, an assumption which begs the question in this context.

Something more must be said to defend the charge of cheating. The best discussion here is offered by Sider, and so we will focus on what he says [2001: 39–41]. Sider basically makes two claims. First, he says that taking certain items as brute is obviously cheating. Second, he says that, whatever makes these to be cases of cheating, it is clearly shared by taking the past to be brute.<sup>19</sup> In this vein, he goes on to offer a hypothesis as to what unifies all these cases of cheating.

Let’s begin with Sider’s list of the ‘obvious’ cheats<sup>20</sup>:

- i. brute dispositions,
- ii. brute counterfactuals,
- iii. laws of nature as universally possessed properties like ‘*being such that all Fs lawfully must be Gs*’,
- iv. primitive spatial tense operators analogous to primitive temporal tense operators, and
- v. primitive personal tense operators (which would replace quantification over other persons).

[Sider 2001: 40]

We tend to agree that all of these are to be rejected, but for reasons differing among some of the items, none of which obviously apply to a brute past (or at least apply in a way which vindicates an independent objection).

<sup>17</sup>The objection from being-supervenience would then not be independent of these objections; compare the remarks near the end of Section IV. However, we are now investigating whether there is something deeper at the heart of the objection from being-supervenience, and the candidates we consider are clearly distinct from the objections which non-presentists themselves take as distinct from the objection from being-supervenience. (One qualification: Bigelow does not carefully distinguish the problem of relations from the problem of being-supervenience; cf. note 7.)

<sup>18</sup>Sider says ‘At first glance it would appear that the presentist’s tensed truths float free of the world’ [2001: 36]. Keller discusses a version of presentism which he describes as the view that ‘truths that are purported to create trouble for presentism [i.e., past-tense truths] are not made true by anything’ [2004: 91].

<sup>19</sup>Sider has the same attitude toward accepting a brute future. Also, Sider has two ways of describing the idea of a brute past: a linguistic way, ‘primitive temporal operators’, and a metaphysical way, ‘primitive tensed properties of the world’. His metaphysical construal indicates he is thinking of being-supervenience presentism, and his discussion of ‘cheating’ may simply be an attempt to bring out the unacceptability of it (something we grant at the end of Section II). But we offer the discussion in the main text in case there is something more.

<sup>20</sup>Immediately prior to describing the items on his list, Sider gives a somewhat different label for them: ‘dubious ontologies’ [2001: 40].

Laws of nature as universally possessed properties (iii) are to be rejected because, intuitively, they put laws of nature into the wrong category, that of properties. If there are brute laws of nature, then they have a *sui generis* metaphysical status. (This closely parallels the problem with being-supervenience presentism: it shoves the past into the mould of present things or how things presently are.) This charge is not obviously applicable to accepting a brute past.

Primitive spatial tense operators (iv) and primitive personal tense operators (v) are to be rejected because they are horrendously counter-intuitive. Things are otherwise for accepting a brute past (i.e., accepting primitive temporal tense operators).

Brute dispositions (i) and brute counterfactuals (ii) are not, by themselves, counterintuitive. Why are they to be rejected? If they are to be rejected at all, it is because some careful work in metaphysics (of the sort described in the previous section) has shown that there is no reason to think they exist (because acknowledged dispositions and counterfactuals can be reductively explained).<sup>21</sup> Maybe something similar can be said about a brute past, but that requires *independent* motivation.

What does Sider offer as unifying (i)–(v)? He says they all involve attributing ‘irreducibly *hypothetical*’ aspects to reality; such things “‘point beyond” their instances’ [Sider 2001: 41, his italics]. Insofar as we understand this, we find it (in and of itself) unobjectionable; as far as we can tell, thinking otherwise is sheer metaphysical prejudice.<sup>22</sup> So, even if a brute past would amount to a hypothetical aspect of reality, that is no mark against it.<sup>23</sup>

Maybe the thought is that such aspects of reality—or at least a brute past—would be utterly mysterious. But that is so only in the sense that they would be fundamental. And, in that sense, things and things being a certain way are equally mysterious. It is important not to forget that what is fundamental has no reductive explanation.

## VII. Keller-Inspired Objections

Keller discusses two versions of presentism which reject (BSP).<sup>24</sup> His discussion of each suggests an objection one might give to brute past presentism.

<sup>21</sup>We say ‘If they are to be rejected at all...’ because we are unsure that the case has been fully made when it comes to brute dispositions.

<sup>22</sup>There are difficulties in distinguishing metaphysical intuition and prejudice which we shall not here pursue. But, as far as we can tell, the majority intuition is not in favour of Sider’s metaphysical prejudice. Laws of nature provide the best example. To use the most popular ‘non-hypothetical’ account of laws of nature, i.e., the best-system account: it’s strikingly counterintuitive to most that laws of nature are nothing more than what is identified by a certain function when applied to the actual distribution of properties and relations among actual things. In other words, most think that laws of nature *should* ‘point beyond’ their instances. For a quick sketch of the best-system account, see Lewis [1986: xi–xiii].

<sup>23</sup>Anyway, the antecedent of this conditional is not obvious. Maybe it should be accepted if the past is understood in terms of primitive tensed properties presently possessed by the world; in that case, the way things presently are points beyond itself ‘to the past’. But that is not the kind of past we have in mind; we have in mind a brute past which is not to be understood in terms of either things or the way things are. Cf. the end of Section IV, Section V and note 19.

<sup>24</sup>These are, in his terminology, versions of ‘Truthmaker-denying presentism’; see Keller [2004: 89].

One objection is that brute past presentism endorses an implausible Meinongian metaphysics: past things don't exist, but they *are* in some sense [Keller 2004: 89–91]. Such a metaphysics is indeed to be avoided (because counterintuitive); but it is not what brute past presentism endorses. According to it, the past is an aspect of reality, but for it that is just a matter of what things *formerly* existed and how they *were*. The past is not a matter of things which exist, nor a matter of things which *are* in any other sense. Brute past presentism does not postulate an even more fundamental category of *being* such that only some of the things which *are* possess the extra attribute of *existence*. Rather, some things exist and, *formerly*, other things existed.

A second objection is that consideration of propositions requires rejection of brute past presentism. Keller claims that propositions have constituents, otherwise there is no explaining that the proposition *The Tower was on the Thames* is relational while the proposition *The Tower was a tower* is not. And, he claims, if propositions have constituents, then the proposition *The Tower was on the Thames* has two constituents which are said by the proposition to stand in a certain relation. But, then, there do exist *things* upon which the truth of the proposition *The Tower was on the Thames* supervenes [Keller 2004: 91–3].<sup>25</sup>

This objection is not compelling. The problem is that it takes talk of the 'constituents' of a proposition too seriously. To avoid this, let's instead think of sentences. What accounts for 'The Tower was on the Thames' being relational? That it says a *relation formerly held* between the Tower and the Thames. Is the sentence committed to the existence of the Tower and the Thames? No, it is only committed to their *former existence*.<sup>26</sup> What, then, determines whether the sentence speaks truly? The past about things and how things were. And, according to brute past presentism, that itself is not a matter of things or how things are.

### VIII. One Last Objection

A final objection presents a dilemma by appealing to a certain *putative* intuition.<sup>27</sup>

Put in the style of (II) from the argument laid out in Section II, the intuition is:

- (P) Past-tense claims do not depend on any present aspect of reality for their truth-value.

<sup>25</sup>Keller offers this objection in discussion of a version of presentism which he describes as the view that 'truths that are purported to create trouble for presentism [i.e., past-tense truths] are not made true by anything' [2004: 91]; cf. note 18.

<sup>26</sup>Of course, this way of defusing Keller's argument makes especially pressing for us the question of reference to formerly existing things. However, as we see it, so long as the problem of relations can be solved, this is not a problem just for us; it is then just the standard philosophical problem of reference. So long as the problem of relations can be solved, we can appeal to relations of causation, etc. Cf. note 7.

<sup>27</sup>We thank an anonymous reviewer for this journal for pressing us on this.

The dilemma—one facing all presentists—is then as follows. Horn one: if past-tense claims are said to depend on a non-present aspect of reality for their truth, then the view would not seem to be a version of presentism. Horn two: if past-tense claims are said to depend on a present aspect of reality for their truth, then the view is committed to denying (P), which *seems* highly counter-intuitive.

This objection fails to undermine brute past presentism. Which horn of the dilemma we grasp depends on how we, as brute past presentists, understand (P). We claim that, on one reading, (P) is intuitive but not a problem for brute past presentism, but on a second reading not intuitive at all.

That there are two readings of (P) is a result of the fact that, on brute past presentism, there are in fact two ways to think of the temporal location of the past, itself a result of the fact that there are two ways to think of the past. One way of thinking of the past is available on any plausible view. On any plausible view, ‘Socrates died’, ‘World War II occurred’, and ‘Mt. St Helens erupted’ are true claims about past events. Now think of that one big event which consists of all past events, and call it ‘the past<sub>e</sub>’. Then on any plausible view, ‘The past<sub>e</sub> occurred’ is a true claim about a *past* event. It’s when we think of the past along the lines of the past<sub>e</sub> that: the past is intuitively earlier than the present; the past is intuitively not present, but in the past; the past is intuitively not a present, but rather a past, aspect of reality; and (P) is intuitively true. But understood this way, (P) is not a problem for brute past presentism. According to brute past presentism (a philosophical view which attempts to be metaphysically perspicuous), these ordinary claims about past events are made true, not by the existence of events which are just like present ones except for being past, but rather by an altogether different aspect of reality, viz., by the shape of the past as we have up to now been understanding that term in making our philosophical claims.<sup>28</sup>

This brings us to the second way of thinking about the past. This is as a distinct aspect of reality of the sort postulated by brute past presentism, and so is a way of thinking only available to brute past presentism (and like-minded views). As noted, as brute past presentists, this is how we have been thinking of the past up to now. When thinking of the past this way—a way not perspicuously reflected in ordinary claims about the past—it is *not* counter-intuitive to think of it as a present aspect of reality, and so (P) is not intuitively true. This is because, thinking of the past this way, we are simply thinking of it as an aspect of reality, distinct from presently existing things and how those things are, that is *now* available to be something upon which the truth-value of claims could depend.

In other words, as brute past presentists, not only do we say that the past is a fundamental aspect of reality, but we are also willing to say that the past is a *present* aspect of reality.<sup>29</sup> This view is consistent with, indeed explains, the intuitive idea that past-tense claims are made true in an importantly

<sup>28</sup>Cf. note 16 re. the distinction between such ordinary and philosophical claims.

<sup>29</sup>Cf. the first note in note 3.

different way from present-tense claims (an idea not captured by the eternalist's four-dimensional vision of things existing in the past as well as the present); and it also is, as we've explained, consistent with the more ordinary way of thinking of the past on which it is a past aspect of reality and so (P) is intuitively true. As we see it, any intuitive appearance of (P) is due to thinking of the past in this ordinary way.

We'll end by noting that parallel things could be said on behalf of what we'll now call *brute fact presentism*, viz., the view mentioned in Section II according to which the truth-value of past-tense claims supervenes on present things of a special sort, namely present facts 'about the past'. Why then do we reject brute fact presentism in favour of brute past presentism? Although, given the parallel, we think the former is on the right track, we nonetheless reject it because (when trying to speak in a metaphysically perspicuous way) we deny the existence of facts altogether. As we explained in Section III, we think fact-talk is always parasitic on something metaphysically more fundamental. In the case of talk of facts about present things, it's the present things and how they are that is more fundamental. In the case of talk of facts about the past, it's the past itself which is more fundamental.<sup>30</sup>

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