

# Once Grounded, Always Grounded

## past truths without present grounds

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### Abstract

Presentism, roughly the view that only present objects exist, is intuitively appealing, and hence worthy of serious consideration. However, according to another equally intuitive and well-established constraint on truth, propositions require *grounding*, i.e. a worldly item capable of suitably ground their truth. Given that presentists are not committed to the existence of past objects like Caesar or dinosaurs, what could possibly ground the present truth of propositions about Cesar or dinosaurs? Henceforth, I shall refer to this challenge faced by presentists as the grounding objection to presentism.

In this final research paper, I set out to clarify such objection, carefully examine the number of different answers to it, and finally assess whether they succeed. In doing this, I shall proceed as follows. In the first part, I will spell out the objection more in details, and specify presentists are mainly faced with a particular explanatory challenge rather than with a mere request of specifying an ontological ground for propositions about the past. Along the way, I will also lay out some desiderata for a overly satisfying solution to the grounding objection on behalf of the presentists. In the second part, accordingly, I'll proceed to weigh various presentist solutions by considering how well they fare in providing efficacious explanations for the truth of past propositions. Finally, I will set forward my preferred versions of the solution to the objection, helping myself from a specific reading of the notion of *grounding* and also appealing to a more minimalist strategy. Crucially, the challenge will be met on the basis of a suitable explanation of why past propositions are true.

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# §1 Introduction

Before proceeding to the formulation of the grounding objection faced by presentists, it can be of interest to dwell briefly on presentism's core claims, and on several compelling reasons for arguing in favor of it.

## 1.1. *Presentism, tense realism and intuitiveness*

First off, it is helpful to characterize presentism by comparing and contrasting it with further rival positions. Hence, accordingly, a bit of taxonomy is in order here. To begin with, I shall draw a map of the different views in metaphysics of time according to a pair of different (and yet mutually dependent) axes: the former has to do with the distinction between dynamic and static theories of time, and the latter with the different takes of the views as far as temporal ontology is involved.

Adopting a terminology that goes back to McTaggart (1908), dynamic A-theories of time aim at achieving a full description of reality by appealing to tensed facts, i.e. facts that sometimes, but *not always* obtain, whereas, according to static B-theories, a complete description of reality is exhausted by a different category of facts, such that, if a fact obtain, then it *always* obtains (crudely, *once* a fact, *always* a fact). In the light of this, the disagreement between the A-theorist and the B-theorist can be cast not only in terms of realism and anti-realism about tensed facts, but also as a substantial disagreement about which rock-bottom facts really constitute reality at its most basic level. On the one hand, the A-theorist holds that what facts obtain and which propositions are true change with time, treating tensed facts as key-terms in a fully articulating discourse that aims at stating which facts really obtain; conversely, the B-theorist holds that despite things do indeed change with time, what facts really obtain does not change with it. Moreover, she also contends to be in the position of fully describing reality without using the notion of tensed facts<sup>1</sup> (Correia & Rosenkranz 2012: 1). As a way of example for our purposes here, presentism can be seen as a prominent instance of dynamic A-theory, along with the growing block theory of time; conversely, eternalists defend a different and more static B-theory.

Moving on to temporal ontology, the field is, quite similarly, dominated by three main options, for it is possible to choose again between presentism, eternalism (labeled also as permanentism<sup>2</sup>), and the growing block theory of time. More complex differences aside, the three views differ in virtue of their ontological liberalism. Eternalists are the most liberal, for they are committed not only to the existence of present objects such as Donald Trump, the Eiffel Tower or my laptop, but also to merely past and merely future entities like Caesar or Lunar outposts, if there will be any (Miller 2013: 345). Presentists, on the other hand,

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<sup>1</sup>A point of clarification is in order here. Of course, B-theorists need not completely eschew tensed statements to the point of abandoning them, or considering them false; simply, they deem tensed statements to be inappropriate to fully articulate which facts make up reality from a serious metaphysical standpoint.

<sup>2</sup>The label is due to Williamson (2013: 4).

are more parsimonious, and are committed solely to what is present and exists now,<sup>3</sup> whilst growing blockers occupy a sort of middle position, for they accept present and past entities in their ontology without committing themselves to the existence of future yet-to-be entities (Miller 2013: 347).

Hence, to a certain approximation, presentism is to be understood as a dynamic A-theory of time that employs tensed facts to best describe what reality is ultimately made up of, and that is ontologically committed only to the existence of present objects. So far, so good: these appear to be claims that presentists are likely to accept. Yet, and more deeply, why being presentist in the first place? What can motivate presentism? Or, to put it in different terms, if the aforementioned claims describe what presentism consists of, why should one want to provide arguments for defending it?

For reasons of space, it is not my aim to provide an exhaustive list here, but I wish to highlight at least two reasons why presentism is to be deemed as worthy of serious consideration among philosophers of time. Firstly, as it has been pointed out for in the case of temporal ontology, presentism is extremely parsimonious, for it is committed merely to present objects. From a methodological perspective, simplicity and parsimony are certainly important virtues of a theory, regardless of how sympathetic to Quinean desert landscapes one is. Secondly, and more importantly, several presentists have defended their view by claiming that it is highly *intuitive* (Markosian 2004: 48; Tallant 2009: 345; Bigelow 1996: 36), and even those who objected to presentism have acknowledged the pretty intuitive pull of the view.<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, presentism nicely incorporates what we're naturally inclined to think, namely that the past was present, but it exists no more, and, symmetrically, that the future will be present, but it doesn't exist yet.<sup>5</sup>

Hence, to recap, presentism not only displays a generally valuable ontological parsimony, but, importantly, it is also capable of satisfying the utmost basic commonsense intuitions on the nature of time. Hopefully, these could be considered as acceptable reasons to embrace presentism in the first place. However, theories must also be weighed according to their explanatory power, and as far as concerns such key aspect, it still remains to be seen how presentism fares. In the background view endorsed throughout this paper, I shall assume the inference to the best explanation as a guiding principle: given that presentists are faced with an objection that presses them to explain the truth of certain propositions, the challenge will be met in the light of the best explanation available in the presentist market. I turn on

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<sup>3</sup>For a more precise and serious characterization of presentism that dispenses the property of *presentness/being present*, presentists can also claim that there exists at most one time, and that, in addition, always that only one time that exists is the only referent of “now” (see also Correia & Rosenkranz 2015). For different characterizations of presentism, see also Markosian 2004 and Crisp 2003; for a thorough survey of ways of characterizing presentism, I shall defer to McKinnon 2013.

<sup>4</sup>“Though I think presentism ultimately must be rejected, its guiding intuition is compelling: the past is no more, while the future is yet to be” (Sider 2001: 11).

<sup>5</sup>Some points of clarification are in order here. Firstly, presentism genuine intuitiveness can be disputed (Torrengo, forthcoming); secondly, methodologically speaking, one could also deny that intuitions play an important role in metaphysics (Benovsky 2013). Be it as it may, for the purpose of the present essay I shall consider the intuitiveness of a view as sufficient reason to motivate it (see also Fine 1985: 7).

to presentist explanations later on in the essay; before that, I will spell out in more details what exactly presentists are required to explain.

### 1.2. *Truth-grounding: truth-makers, grounds and explanations*

When it comes to account for the truth of propositions, it is commonly held that the truth of a statement requires *grounding*, so that truths do not float free in a void. Interestingly enough, the grounding requirement is open to different interpretations. In what follows, I shall carefully examine the most prominent readings, in order to shed more light on the constraint in question.

Under an initially plausible reading, the requirement simply excludes circular explanations. A contrasting example will be of help here: in the case of the truth-teller paradox, we're faced with a sentence whose truth is explainable only in virtue of the sentence itself, hence violating the non-circularity constraint.

**Truth-teller:** *this very sentence is true.*

Moreover, in such basic version of the truth-teller paradox, the self-referential sentence can very plausibly be true, as it can be equally plausibly false, for there's nothing that could ground or explain why the sentence is to be considered either true or false. Be that as it may, I take the lesson of the paradox to be the following: a genuine explanation ought not to simply restate what needs to be explained. Accordingly, a more suitable way of explaining the truth of a proposition is to appeal to the connective "because", and adopt the following schema:

The proposition  $\langle p \rangle$  is true<sup>6</sup> *because* it is the case that  $p$  (where  $p$  is, to a certain extent, explanatory and is not a mere reiteration of the *explanandum* at stake in the explanation.)

As a way of a (very classic) example:

The proposition "The rose is red" is true *because* the rose is red.

As things stand, presentists could certainly make use of such simple strategy, for it would be both explanatory and satisfactory. As we shall see later on in the paper, a small minority of presentists flirts with this option. Nevertheless, as it has been claimed, there is a quite compelling reason to reject this extremely simple account, for when it comes to explanations, perhaps what best explains the truth of a proposition is an object that makes the very proposition true. Accordingly, some philosophers understand the grounding-requirement on truth in the light of the truth-making principle (TMP):

**TMP:** Necessarily, if the proposition  $\langle p \rangle$  is true, then there is some entity  $\alpha$  in virtue of which  $\langle p \rangle$  is true (Armstrong 1991: 190; Rodriguez-Pereyra 2005:18).

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<sup>6</sup>Here and henceforth,  $\langle p \rangle$  stands for "the proposition that  $p$ ".

Where the truth-maker entity  $\alpha$  is a wordly item whose existence necessitates (and not merely causes) the truth of the proposition in question. However, not every truth-making theorist agrees on which specific entity  $\alpha$  has to be, even though it is widely accepted that it has to be an *entity* at least.<sup>7</sup>

Intuitively, theories of truth-grounding inspired by the truth-making principle aim at providing informative claims about three important domains: what exists, what is true, and what is the relation between what exists and what is true. However, it can be worthwhile to dwell a little more on the truth-making principle, for the grounding objection to presentism stems directly from its adoption. In fact, the principle naturally suggests a more controversial thought, according to which *every* truth has some truthmaker(s).<sup>8</sup> Such extension of the principle to every truth goes under the name of truthmaking maximalism.

Cameron (forthcoming, 4-5) thoroughly explains the reasons behind the thought. Truth-making theorists who embrace truth-making principle and truth-making maximalism seem to be driven by considerations of parsimony regarding brute truths.<sup>9</sup> Roughly, the idea is to keep the class of brute truths as minimal as possible, and, in their picture, the only brute truths are expressed by *pure existence claims*, i.e. propositions whose content is simply the existence of some thing(s). In fact, either the truth of the proposition in question is a brute truth because it is a pure existence claim such as  $\langle \text{Dario exists} \rangle$ , or the truth of the proposition in question is explained by another brute truth (i.e., the existence of a truth-maker, as the proponents of truth-making are happy to allow).

Regardless of the considerations of parsimony that justify the principle, truth-making maximalism is known to lead to several difficulties which are not easily dealt with. In fact, statements like negative existentials (and negative truths more in general) strike many as particularly problematic: what object could possibly serve as truth-maker for the truth of  $\langle \text{unicorns do not exist} \rangle$  or  $\langle \text{there are no penguins in the North Pole} \rangle$ ? Perhaps the absence of unicorns (Martin 1996), or the negative fact that there are no penguins in that particular region of the Earth; perhaps the world instantiating the property *being such that there are no penguins there* (Cameron 2008); or perhaps some other rather bizarre and counter-intuitive object or property. Still, the appeal to negative facts and the addition of strange properties

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<sup>7</sup>As a matter of fact, truth-making theorists have a more domestic dispute about which entities best qualify as truth-makers. Armstrong (1997) goes for states of affairs, namely particulars that have properties, such as *the-rose-being-red*, whilst in the seminal paper written by Mulligan, Simons and Smith (1984) the favored truth-making entity is a *trope*, i.e. a particularized property, such as *the redness of the rose*. As it should be clear, regardless of the entity in question, the authors all agree that truth depends on being because entities (or more crudely, *things*) make propositions true.

<sup>8</sup>Following Simons (2005, 154), I deem the thought to be controversial because of how demanding it is: in fact, some truths may require specific truth-makers that turn out to be particularly difficult to identify.

<sup>9</sup>The reader may wonder whether there are truth-making theorists who reject truth-making maximalism. As a matter of fact, there are: following MacBride (2013:11), I shall distinguish between truth-making maximalists, truth-making optimalists and truth-making nihilists and then map the spectrum of such positions as follows. According to the maximalist, every truth has some truth-makers; according to the optimalist, the majority of truths (though not every truth) has some truth-makers; finally, according to the nihilist, the core idea of truth-making is to be reject, and hence truths do not need any truth-makers at all. As it will be clearer, such positions will crop up in different places later on in the paper.

in one's ontology are often regarded as suspicious moves, and are likely to eventuate further complications (see also Griffith 2012; Rodriguez-Pereyra 2006: 194, 195).

In the light of such difficulties, David Lewis proposed a different and weaker understanding of the grounding requirement on truth, maintaining the quite compelling idea that truth depends on being and yet avoiding the issues generated by the adoption of truth-making maximalism. Such weaker understanding appeals to the covariance relation of supervenience:<sup>10</sup> Hence, there cannot be a difference in what is true without a difference in what things are and which properties and relation they instantiate (Lewis 1999: 206, 207). Accordingly, a world in which the proposition ⟨there are no penguins in the North Pole⟩ is true and its neighbour world in which the proposition is false will generally differ from an ontological point of view, even if there's no single truth-maker that make those propositions true.<sup>11</sup>

### 1.3. *The grounding objection to presentism*

So far, so good: still, can presentists accent such intuitively plausible grounding constraint on truth? *Prima facie*, it would seem that that they can't, for when it comes to ground the truth of propositions about the past, presentists are faced with the following mutually inconsistent claims, that jointly yield to the conclusion listed below:

- (1) Some propositions about the past are true, and some are false. For instance, it is true that sometimes in the past, there were dinosaurs.
  - (2) Truth supervenes on being: propositions about the past need to be suitably grounded in reality. Merely past objects like dinosaurs can properly ground the proposition that, sometimes in the past, there were dinosaurs.<sup>12</sup>
  - (3) Presentist ontology: there exist no past objects. Obviously, dinosaurs do not figure on the list of the (presently) existing objects.
- (C) Presentists cannot identify the requisite truth-makers for grounding the truth of propositions about the past.

I shall label such inconsistency as the grounding objection to presentism, and then try to map the possible reactions to it.

Under a certain reading, the objection could be taken as a sufficient reason to abandon presentism (Sider 2001: 41). Roughly, this amounts to take (C) seriously. I will not pursue

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<sup>10</sup>The supervenience relation is typically understood as a modal relation of covariance, normally holding between sets of properties: roughly, A-properties supervene on B-properties if and only if no two entities can differ with respect to A-properties without also differing with respect to their B-properties. For a more in-depth study of the supervenience relation, see also Mclaughling and Bennett 2005.

<sup>11</sup>Following the taxonomy provided in footnote 9, Lewis' version of truth-making theory can be considered as an example of truth-making optimalism, given that some truths (like negative existentials) do not require any truth-maker.

<sup>12</sup>If one eschews the notion of object, one could equally appeal to facts constituted by objects and relations.

this line here, for I deem presentism to be a serious view, worthy to be endorsed and defended. Accordingly, presentists have the following options to deal with the objection. Firstly, they could reject (1) and deny the truth of past claims, arguing either that they're false, or that even if they're not strictly speaking true, at least they're *quasi-true*. However, such strategy doesn't seem convincing: firstly, the notion of *quasi-truth* does not seem particularly apt if applied to propositions about the past;<sup>13</sup> secondly, it's also unreasonably counter-intuitive. In fact, we would almost unanimously and immediately accept the truth of several propositions about the past, and deny it would undermine most of the beliefs we commonly hold.<sup>14</sup>

Secondly, presentists could try to give up on the idea that truth supervenes on being, and embrace some version of truth-making nihilism. Accordingly, instead of dealing with a truth-making objection to presentism, they could simply rebut the argument and formulate a new presentist objection to truth-making theorists (see for instance Merricks 2007: chapter 6). Despite the appeal of the move, it has to be admitted that one perspicuous reason for adopting some version of the truth-making principle is that it easily accommodates genuine realist sympathies (Armstrong 2004: 29; Bigelow 1988:86; Heil 2003: 61): hence, abandoning the important connection between truth and reality would consequently lead to a collapse into some form of idealism. Even if the worry appears to be fair, it seems also quite questionable: the truth-making principle alone does not immediately guarantee realism, for it depends on which objects serve as truth-makers (plausibly, they should be concrete objects rather than mere *abstracta*). Be that as it may, the supervenience relation holding between truth and reality should not be abandoned simply because it ensures that truths do not float free, and this is exactly what presentists should want to avoid.

Finally, presentist could take up the challenge, and then try to show that they can properly ground the truth of proposition about the past. Interestingly, this is the standard reaction displayed by presentists. In fact, when pressed with the objection, presentists have a lot to say in their defence, and, as a matter of fact, they pursued a plethora of strategies to meet the grounding requirement on truth. In the remainder of the paper, I shall consider such strategies in turn. However, before doing that, I shall also outline some desiderata that presentists should bear in mind in their responses, and specify what the grounding objection ultimately consists of.

Crudely put, if presentists aim at providing a satisfactory solution to the grounding objection, then they should follow the following methodological constraints:

- *Parsimony/intuitiveness*. Presentists should keep an eye on parsimony: in fact, they should not multiply entities beyond necessity. That is to say, they ought not to enrich

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<sup>13</sup>The notion of *quasi-truth* is employed, most notably, for the development of many-valued logics, in which the number of truth values is not restricted only to truth and falsity and, accordingly, different degrees of truth are allowed (see, for instance, Gottwald 1989). In the literature that deals with the grounding objection, Sanson and Caplan (2011: footnote 10) attribute the notion of *quasi-truth* to Sider, and consider its application to past propositions as a coherent (though implausible) possibility (Sanson and Caplan 2011: 198).

<sup>14</sup>For instance, Dummett (2004: 44) firmly dismisses the denial of truths about the past by considering it a “repugnant” idea.

their ontology by adding entities just in order to meet the challenge they face. More specifically, they should leave the world as simple as they find it, without inflating it by means of dubious posits.

- *Explanatory power.* Presentist strategies and presentist posits ought to be, to a certain extent, explanatory.
- *Consistency.* Presentists should not pursue strategies that cast doubts on the main tenets of presentism: more importantly, presentist answers to the grounding objection should accommodate the core intuitions of their view.
- *Independence Principle.* As I shall clarify in the next subsection, presentists ought to heed the independence principle, according to which the truths of propositions about the past depend on the past only, rather than on the present.

Finally, such methodological considerations also shed some light on the very nature of the grounding objection to presentism. As it will be clearer, I take the objection to be an explanatory challenge: it is not just a matter of providing a ground for the truth of propositions about the past; more importantly, the challenge will be successfully met if presentists can explain *why* propositions about the past are true in genuinely presentist terms. More crudely, it is not simply a matter of entities (properties or relations) that *make* such claims true; rather, presentists should be after a fully satisfactory explanation for the more relevant question of why they are true.

## §2 Presentist solutions

### 2.1. *Independence Principle vs Record Constraint*

In the following subsections, I shall examine in details the different solutions set forward by presentists to the objection they're faced with. In doing this, I shall also recall the desiderata and the methodological constraints I outlined before. However, before doing that, it is important to call to mind a guiding principle for the important explanatory project that lies at the core of the objection:

**Independence Principle:** (some) truths about the past do not depend on the present (Sanson & Caplan 2011: 197).

The independence principle plays a critical role for how presentists should conceive the past: in fact, it is plausible to hold that in order to explain the truth of propositions about the past, one should look at the past, i.e. to how things were. Nevertheless, despite its obviousness and conspicuousness, several presentists (if not most of them) deny the principle: surprisingly, in order to meet the grounding requirement, they basically enrich the present in such a way that past truths are presently grounded in some entities or properties. One way or another, the past is somehow still part of reality, and its being part of reality can properly ground the truth of propositions about the past. More specifically, the independence principle is explicitly replaced by what Kierland calls “the record constraint”:



**Record Constraint:** reality carries its history along with it while time passes; hence, past truths are grounded in a present record of the past (Kierland 2012: 4).

Interestingly, Kierland (2012: 4-5) adds four different features to the constraint, with the aim of improving the explanatory power of the presentist solution:

- *Causal power*: the record of the past carried along by the present must be an *effect* of the past.<sup>15</sup>
- *Information-carrying*: the record must be informative, to the extent that it is able to provide complete and precise information about the past.<sup>16</sup>
- *Clarity*: the record should be, at least in principle, easily accessible, such that it should not take many efforts to read off the information it carries.
- *Distinctiveness*: interestingly, the record is a *sui generis* entity. In Kierland’s terms, the posit has no role but to keep the record of the past.<sup>17</sup>

These four features jointly lead to enrich the present with the addition of a record of the past, contra what the principle of independence prescribes.

## 2.2. The bigger picture: record-inspired solutions

Kierland (2012) and Kierland & Monton (2007) represent the clearest case of a broader strategy which is quite widespread among presentists. In fact, these authors posit a brute, *sui generis* entity, the Past,<sup>18</sup> which should efficaciously explain and ground the truth of propositions about the past. Others go for special tensed properties (Bigelow 1996), Lucretian<sup>19</sup> properties globally instantiated by the world, such as *being such that it contained dinosaurs* or *being such that Caesar crossed the Rubicon*. Likewise, Cameron appeals to another set of special properties, named temporal distributional properties (Cameron: 2011). Such notion is complex, and needs some unpacking: Cameron borrows from Parsons (2004:

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<sup>15</sup>As Kierland notes (2012, footnote 15), presentists are allowed to appeal to the effects of the past if and only if the problem of cross-temporal relations can be successfully solved. As things stand, the literature offers different solutions to such further problem (see, for instance, Bigelow 1996). However, Kierland’s strategy seems not only to conflate together two different problems, but also to be considerably costly, given that the solution to the (quite demanding) grounding objection to presentism depends on the solution to the (equally demanding) problem of cross-temporal relations. In fairness to Kierland, I should add that in the same footnote he hints at a unified solution to the two objections: yet, his hints simply call for further arguments, and something more needs to be said about such allegedly unified solution.

<sup>16</sup>It may be argued that such constraint of completeness is too epistemically demanding. In fact, it is hardly possible that the present can carry the record of the past with such precision and accuracy, and some past truths may not be groundable exactly because of the insufficiency of information available.

<sup>17</sup>Again, such fourth feature risks to render the posit utterly *ad hoc*.

<sup>18</sup>Following Davidson (2013:166), I will refer to Kierland and Montons brute past as “the Past”, to differentiate it from talks about the past as it is generally understood.

<sup>19</sup>The label is due to the fact that Lucretius himself allegedly held a similar view.

1) the notion of spatial distributional properties, like for instance *being polka dotted*, which is a conjunctive property like *having a dot here* and *having another dot there*. In the analogous temporal case, for instance, Cameron presently instantiates the complex temporal distributional properties of *having been a child* and then *having been a boy*: such property would provide the proper ontological ground for claims like ⟨Sometimes in the past, Cameron was a child⟩. In the same spirit, Rhoda (2009) goes as far as to claim that propositions about the past are true because of objects such as memories in the mind of God that make them true.

It is now worth pausing a bit, just to set the record straight after such slightly extravagant array of solutions. The strategies set forward by most of the presentists basically follow a two steps recipe: firstly, they give up the independence principle, enriching the present enough to ground the truths about the past; secondly, they choose an entity (property or relation as they prefer) in order to do the grounding work. Such way of proceeding leads to the wrong results. First off, it violates the methodological constraints outlined above: on the one hand, it is reasonable to be skeptical about new, implausible *sui generis* ontological posits like brute entities (the Past) or God’s memories. On the other, they appear to be extremely costly in terms of parsimony, theoretical simplicity and, above all, explanatory power. In fact, in fairness to such strategies, I should note that such posits tend to be accepted in different contexts: for instance, in Rhoda’s case, if you’re a theist, then you can accept God’s memories in your ontology. However, and most importantly, the challenge in question here is an explanatory challenge: hence, even if such entities are acceptable and, *de facto*, accepted as appropriate in different contexts, they don’t seem to be the right kind of thing that explains *why* past propositions are true in the temporal case. As a general remark on the dialectic at stake here, it should be added that these presentists are well aware of the explanatory dimension of the challenge;<sup>20</sup> nevertheless, it would seem that the explanations provided are not entirely convincing. Accordingly, to forestall any misunderstanding, I don’t mean to say that they are not explanations at all: explanations come in degree, in the sense some are better than others; simply, although they managed to provide a ground for truths about the past, such explanations have hitherto proved to be defective. To prove my point, I shall quickly reformulate these strategies by appealing to the connective “*because*”. Such reformulation should not only shed more light on their implausibility, but also prompt different solutions to the problem.

- ⟨Sometimes in the past, Caesar crossed the Rubicon⟩ is true *because* the intrinsic shape of a *sui generis* entity, the Past, makes it true.
- ⟨Sometimes in the past, Caesar crossed the Rubicon⟩ is true *because* specific memories in the mind of God make it true.

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<sup>20</sup>For instance, Rhoda (2009:46) writes: “to offer a theory of truth-makers for some class of truths is to explain their truth. It is to specify the features, aspects, or constituents of reality that ground the truths in question. As such, an adequate theory of truth-makers for some class of truths must satisfy the norms of explanation”.

- ⟨Sometimes in the past, Caesar crossed the Rubicon⟩ is true *because* the world now instantiates a tensed-properties like *being such that sometimes in the past, Caesar crossed the Rubicon*.

And of course the list could be continued further. Be that as it may, the reformulation clearly shows the implausibility and the insufficiency of the kind of explanation proposed by presentists: one way or another, something more is need to overcome the grounding objection.

Thus, to sum up, such presentist solutions, despite the grounds they provide, cannot give a fully satisfactory explanation of why propositions about the past are true. On the one hand, there are many reasons for being suspicious of completely *ad hoc* posits such as Kierland and Monton’s presently existing Past, or Rhoda’s God’s memories; on the other, the explanations provided by such strategies seem to put the cart before the horse by claiming that propositions about the past are true in virtue of presently existing grounds. In a nutshell, the assumption underlying such explanations seems to be the following: propositions about the past are true *because* the present is such and such. However, at best, it should be the other way around, for propositions about the past should be true in virtue of the past, and of the past only, rather than in virtue of dubious presently existing truth-makers.

Hence, after such defeat, it is worth changing strategy, and head towards a new solution to the grounding objection. I proceed to such task in the next sections: crucially, the new line of answer will focus on a reconsideration of the independence principle and on a specific use of the notion of grounding, which will improve the limits essentially built into the truth-making relation.

### §3 Interlude: from truth-making to grounding

As things stand, it can be worthwhile to dwell a little on how the adoption of the truth-making principle influenced the debate in question. On the one hand, the truth-making relation seems a good way of expressing the compelling intuition that truth depends on being, and the identification of some truth-makers should, at least in principle, accommodate such important intuition. On the other, it could also be argued that, even granting that truth does indeed depend on being, the truth-making relation is still ill-suited for doing the work it should do. I want to square the finger on two reasons why the truth-making relation should be abandoned, or at least treated with a certain skepticism. Firstly, such relation is a cross-categorical relation, for it relates two different categories of entities: the *explanandum* is always a proposition, and the *explanans* is an entity of some sort. In being cross-categorical, truth-making risks of rendering the explanatory project biased from the start: the sources of explanation are limited to entities only, and as it has been pointed out, it is sometimes dubious that entities can achieve an explanatory task successfully. Objects (properties and relations broadly understood) can necessitate existence claims, but are generally ill-suited to explain the truth of a proposition. In fact, why should the truth of a proposition depend on the instantiation of a Lucretian property or on the existence of a brute record of the

past? Even if a certain entity  $e$  grounds the truth of a proposition, the entity alone is not sufficient to explain its truth.

In the truth-making setting, two different dimensions that have to be kept apart are conflated together: the representational dimension of the explanation of the truth of a certain proposition, and the ontological dimension of the grounds of its truth.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, and in the same spirit, the kind of entities proposed as *explanantia* are inadequate for successfully explaining the truth of the propositions in question: this much was particularly clear in the previous examples, in which the truth of propositions was explained by appealing to suspicious (let alone explanatory) posits. Finally, when the truth-making principle is coupled with the record constraint, the explanations provided by presently existing truth-makers are clearly wrong directed, for they explain past truths in virtue of present entities, rather than viceversa.

However, there is still an interesting way out for presentists: rather than relying on the truth-making strategy and the record constraint, they could simply embrace a new grounding-based framework and put it at use with the independence principle. Still, before doing that, more needs to be said about the notion of grounding that I deem to be particularly germane to the debate in question.

In recent years, metaphysicians have found it congenial to talk in terms of grounding (most notably, Fine 2001; Fine 2012; Schaffer 2009; Rosen 2010).<sup>22</sup> It is worth starting from some relevant examples that help to have an intuitive grasp on the notion:

- 1) ⟨the rose is red⟩ is true *because* the rose is red.
- 2) Truth *depends on* being.
- 3) Mental facts obtain *in virtue of* neurophysiological facts.
- 4) The existence of the whole *depends on* the existence of the parts.

Regardless of whether these claims are true, they seem to have something in common: interestingly, they all involve a specific relation of non-causal metaphysical dependence essentially linked to non-causal explanation, known as *grounding*. Understood as a relation, grounding displays certain formal features: asymmetry, irreflexivity, transitivity, non-monotonicity and well-foundedness.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, such grounding relation is supposed to be

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<sup>21</sup>For more discussion on the explanatory limits of truth-making theory, see also Fine (2012: 43-45), Schnieder 2006 and Horwich 2008. I am particularly grateful to Esa Diaz-Leon for a fruitful conversation about this point.

<sup>22</sup>A quick note on the terminology is in order here. Despite the terminological similarity, the notion of grounding I am about to introduce at this point is not straightforwardly related to the grounding objection to presentism. Such notion of grounding has been developed as a useful tool for achieving better theoretical results independently of the grounding objection to presentism, which is mostly framed in terms of truth-making rather than grounding *qua* new notion.

<sup>23</sup>There is general (though not unanimous) agreement on such formal features. For counterexamples on the irreflexivity, see Jenkins 2011; for counterexamples on the transitivity, see Schaffer 2012.

intimately explanatory: Fine, for instance, considers it as a form of metaphysical explanation (Fine 2001:15). Hence, presentists interested in providing a good explanation of why propositions about the past are true might look with interest at the grounding relation, given that it may be exactly what is needed to overcome the grounding objection to presentism.

Before seeing how grounding and presentism may interact with each other, a further and crucial distinction is needed, for it will be of great importance in the sections and subsections to come. Advocates of grounding have a more internal disagreement regarding its relata: under the operational view, claims of ground are ultimately expressed by the operator “because”, take the form of “ $\psi$  because  $\phi$ ” and are not committed to the relata they connect. Conversely, under the relational/predicational view, grounding statements have the form of “ $\phi$  grounds  $\psi$ ”, where  $\psi$  and  $\phi$  are worldly entities of some sort, and the predicate *grounds* expresses a relation of grounding between them.<sup>24</sup> More specifically, it is possible to discriminate among two versions of the predicational view. In the former version, the relata of the predicate are facts, i.e. structured entities made up of objects and relations. In the latter version, grounding relates entities of arbitrary ontological categories (objects, tropes, facts, and so on), and, importantly, the fundamental grounds are taken to exist with a greater degree of reality than the derivative groundee.

With such taxonomy of grounding at hand, I now proceed to consider two relevant interactions between grounding and presentism: Baron’s predicational priority presentism (Baron 2014) and Merlo’s operational cross-temporal grounding (Merlo 2013). Finally, I shall also consider Tallant and Ingram’s minimalist version of presentism (Tallant & Ingram 2015).

## §4 New solutions: grounding and minimalism

### 4.1. Synchronic and diachronic grounding

Baron’s priority presentism is set out as an exercise of applied grounding to the metaphysics of time: drawing from Schaffer’s notion of grounding understood as a relation among entities of arbitrary ontological categories, Baron develops what he calls priority presentism, that roughly amounts to the following claims. Firstly, applying the distinction of fundamental and derivative entities, Baron claims that only the present exists fundamentally, whilst past and future exist merely derivately. Secondly, Baron introduces a new distinction between synchronic and diachronic grounding with the aim of capturing a relation of ontological dependence extended across time. In a nutshell, instances of synchronic grounding are the familiar examples cited at the beginning of many papers that defend (or criticize) the notion: mental facts are grounded in physical facts, sets are grounded in their members, and so forth. In the same spirit, also Rosen (forthcoming: 8) presents grounding as a form of *synchronic necessitation*. Conversely, although examples of diachronic grounding are not

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<sup>24</sup>The distinction is put forward by Correia & Schnieder (2012:10). Advocates of the operational view are Fine (2001, 2012), Correia (2005: 57-64), whilst Schaffer (2006), Rosen (2010) and Audi (2012) all defend the predicational view.

easy to find,<sup>25</sup> Baron is right in claiming that nothing prevents him to understand the notion of grounding diachronically rather than merely synchronically. Hence, in his picture, the present diachronically grounds past and future entities; more specifically, the past is diachronically grounded in special tensed Lucretian properties globally instantiated by the world that are supposed to do the grounding work (Baron 2014: 331-332) .

As interesting as it may be, I find Baron's notion of diachronic grounding inadequate (at least as it is being used in his version of priority presentism; I do not exclude that the notion could turn out to be more efficacious in different contexts). Firstly, given his understanding of the grounding relation as holding among entities, it is hard to see how a view that accepts the existence of past and future objects could still be genuinely considered as presentism. Of course, Baron could have a rejoinder here, claiming that past and future entities are merely derivative, and that, arguably, what matters for presentism is just the priority of the present; yet, to my eyes, his view seems more similar to a Moving Spotlight Theory of Time, or, at least, it cannot be fully accepted as a coherent version of presentism. In fact, the Moving Spotlight Theory roughly consists of the following claims: firstly, it accepts the existence of present, past and future; secondly, it states that the objective present moves like a spotlight across a street (Broad 1923: 59-60; Cameron 2015). In a similar fashion, priority presentism is committed to existence of past, present and future entities, and gives to the (moving) present a central role in doing the grounding work.

Moreover, and more importantly, the diachronic grounding ultimately relies on hardly acceptable Lucretian properties, which are extremely costly in terms of parsimony, intuitiveness and, more importantly, explanatory adequacy. Finally, the direction of dependence captured by Baron's diachronical grounding is supposed to run from the present to the past, and this does not seem correct, for if there's a dependence at all, such dependence should run from the past to present, and not viceversa.

In the light of such reasons, I don't see why Baron's contrast between diachronic and synchronic grounding could constitute a progress with respect of the previously considered solutions; however, I find his view worthy of being taken into account, for it constitutes a nice example of interaction between grounding and presentism. Accordingly, it would be better to consider a different interaction, as I shall do in the next subsection.

#### *4.2. Back to simplicity: cross-temporal grounding*

The solutions hitherto considered appear to be extremely complicated, counter-intuitive and hence to be rejected. Perhaps, all the debate originated from the grounding objection to presentism was much ado about nothing, and, accordingly, it would be better to reconsider some more straightforward ways of solving the issue. For start, a promising strategy could be the following:  $\langle$ Sometimes in the past, Caesar crossed the Rubicon $\rangle$  is true simply because sometimes in the past, Caesar is crossing the Rubicon. Strikingly, this is exactly what the principle of independence naturally suggests: in order to explain the truth of proposition

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<sup>25</sup>In Baron's speculations, an example of diachronic grounding would result from the conjunction of Schaffer's priority monism with the view that the universe has temporal parts (Baron 2014: 328). I am not convinced by Baron's example, for it crucially relies on the acceptance of temporal parts.

about the past it is necessary to look at *the way things were* (Sanson and Caplan 2010:25-26), without locating present truth-makers or pointing at presently existing grounds. Consider the following example. In order to explain the truth of ⟨Arnold was pale⟩, it is possible to choose between two candidates:

PRESENT: ⟨Arnold was pale⟩ is true because Arnold now has the property *having been pale*.

PAST: ⟨Arnold was pale⟩ is true because Arnold once had the property *being pale*.

Clearly, even if both count as explanations, PAST is obviously a better explanation than PRESENT. Bearing this in mind, in order to achieve such improved explanation, a new notion of grounding is needed. Firstly, such new notion has to be cross-temporal, for it must relate what is *now* the case with what *once* was the case but it's no longer such. Secondly, the notion ought to avoid the appeal to properties, given that the appeal to properties and relations alone is not enough to ground and explain the truth of a given proposition.

Merlo (2013) and Fine (unpublished manuscript) independently developed such notion: in fact, in addition to the notion of grounding understood as metaphysical explanation (if  $p$  metaphysically explains  $q$ , then it is really the case that  $p$ ) their idea is to introduce a new grounding operator which is particularly apt to explain the truth of presently true propositions without appealing to present grounds whatsoever (properties, relations or objects). Such grounding operator takes the form of ‘( $\phi$ ) BECAUSE-IN-THE PAST ( $\psi$ )’, and explains the present truth of propositions about the past in virtue of what was the case but it's no longer such. As a way of example:

Sometimes in the past, Caesar crossed the Rubicon is now true BECAUSE-IN-THE PAST Caesar is crossing the Rubicon.

Despite the oddity of the operator used to introduce the *explanans*, the cross-temporal solution is explanatory virtuous: in fact, it explains the truth of a proposition about the past in virtue of how things were, but no longer are. Besides, the explanation offered does not rely on any wordly item: the instantiation of properties or the existence of objects is irrelevant in explaining the truth of the proposition in question, exactly as it should be.

Weighing the cross-temporal solution according to the desiderata and the methodological constraints outlined above, such solution can be fairly considered as a progress from the strategies previously considered. However, this is still a step towards the right direction, for there are even simpler solutions in the market. I turn on to consider the simplest of them in the next subsection.

#### 4.3. *As simple as it can get: Tallant and Ingram's easy way out*

Tallant & Ingram, drawing from Tallant (2009a, 2009b), set out to develop a new version of presentism that refuses to provide not only presently existing truth-makers but also any truth-maker at all for grounding the truth of propositions about the past. Roughly, their version of presentism amounts to the conjunction of three thesis:

- *Wide-based supervenience thesis*: truth supervenes on what is, was and will be the case.<sup>26</sup>
- *Primitive ideology*: truths about the past are expressed by primitive and unanalysable tense operators.
- *Parsimony*: such primitive and unanalysable tense operators do not refer to any entity.

As strikingly simple as it can be,  $\langle$ Sometimes in the past, Caesar crossed the Rubicon $\rangle$  is true because, at some point in the past, it was the case that Caesar crossed the Rubicon. Tallant and Ingram’s idea is to posit a hyperintensional “in virtue of” relation between how the world is now, and how the world was, without having to appeal to presently existing truth-makers (Tallant & Ingram 2015: 364).<sup>27</sup> After all, as they point out, the posit of present truth-makers carried out by most presentists appear to be redundant, for their presently existing truth-makers exist in virtue of how the things were: in Lucretian terms, the world now instantiates the property *being such that Caesar crossed the Rubicon* because sometimes in the past, Caesar crossed the Rubicon. Tallant and Ingram’s proposal is simple: in their picture, such “in virtue of” relation holds between a proposition about the past,  $\langle$ WAS(p) $\rangle$ , and how things were. Intuitively, the stark contrast between the truth-making principle and such easy solution lies in the different relata of the “in virtue of” relation: for truth-making theorists, it holds between a proposition and how the world is; for Tallant and Ingram, between a proposition and how the world was.

Interestingly, such proposal appears to be straightforward, parsimonious and explanatory. Firstly, its simplicity could hardly be questioned: when it comes to account for the truth of  $\langle$ It was the case that p $\rangle$ , the most natural answer is  $\langle$ It was the case that p $\rangle$  is true simply because it was the case that p. Secondly, such solution is certainly parsimonious, for it does not make use of any bizarre or counter-intuitive entity (interestingly, it does not make use of any entity at all).<sup>28</sup> Thirdly, the direction of the explanation is right: in order to explain the truth of a proposition about the past, one needs to appeal to how things were, and not to how things are.

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<sup>26</sup>As Westphal (2006:4) puts it, “a proposition can be true only if there is or *was* something in virtue of which it is true” (italics mine) .

<sup>27</sup>The reader may wonder why Tallant and Ingram’s minimalist solution figures in the same cluster of (allegedly) different grounding-based strategies. To such (fair) worry, my response is two-folded. Firstly, grounding and explanations such as those developed by Tallant and Ingram’s proposal are supposed to be tightly connected (see also Bliss & Trogdon 2016: section IV). In fact, both grounding claims and explanatory claims make use of hyperintensional expressions like “in virtue of” or “because”. Secondly, I am inclined to consider Tallant and Ingram’s minimalist strategy as an instance of *conceptual grounding* holding between the truth of propositions (roughly, the truth of a proposition is explained in virtue of the truth of another one). However, given such limited space, I am not in the position to provide further arguments for support such claim, and hence I will leave this discussion for another time.

<sup>28</sup>I anticipate an objection here: it might be argued that such minimalist solution gives up on the idea that truth supervenes on being, and hence leave many truths about the past floating free in reality. However, the intuition is respected, given that the supervenience base is extended: truth supervenes on what is, was and will be the case.



## §5 Coda: objections and replies

In this section, I proceed to consider three potential objections that could be raised against the views I presented as the most promising lines of solution to the issue faced by presentists. Such exercise should be of interest for two main reasons: firstly, it clarifies the views; secondly, if the replies are sound, it should also strengthen their tenability.

**(1) Skepticism about the notion of grounding:** I should note that the notion of grounding I introduced above has received many important criticisms in the literature (most notably: Wilson 2014, 2016). Such criticisms aim at casting substantial doubts on its intelligibility and adequacy, and ultimately propose to abandon the notion, deemed as ill-suited for doing the explanatory work it promises. Going more into detail about such criticisms exceeds my aims here, and I cannot hope to make justice to the topic in such limited space. Hence, I'll focus simply on the most pressing objections that could be related to the notion of grounding employed in the essay. More specifically, Wilson (2014: section II) argues that such grounding relation cannot capture in an illuminating way claims of metaphysical dependence, for it leaves open important questions regarding the grounding and grounded (for instance: do they equally exist? Are the Grounded goings-on reducible to the Grounding goings-on? How do they depend on each other? And more). Hence, she claims that such too general, coarse-grained relation is to be abandoned, in favor of more classic relations (dubbed “small-g”), such as type or token identity, functional realization, set membership, and many more. If Wilson is right, the cross-temporal grounding solution would be ruled out, for it is based on a fundamentally ill-suited notion of grounding that needs to be get ridden of.

*Reply.* Wilson's criticisms to the notion of grounding are well-founded and justified: in the specific kind of philosophical investigation she's engaging in, the notion is not informative enough to be used successfully. Nevertheless, it has to be borne in mind that the question I'm answering here is different from Wilson's: whilst she's interested in the structure of reality, I'm simply concerned with an explanation of the truth of certain propositions. Wilson's criticisms are local: they are directed against a specific reading of the grounding relation, i.e. the predicational version, and a specific use of it, i.e. as a way to investigating the hierarchical structure of reality. Such criticisms certainly hit their target, but they are not to be overgeneralized to the notion of grounding used to articulate the cross-temporal solution. In fact, such notion is weaker: firstly, it is just a connective, and it is not committed to its relata; secondly, the notion aims at explaining the truths of propositions, and not at capturing relevant patterns of dependence among entities. In the light of this, I agree with Wilson's important criticisms against a specific use of the grounding relation; nevertheless, I simply don't see how such criticisms should undermine the cross-temporal grounding version.

**(2) Cross-temporal grounding and facts:** in the case of cross-temporal grounding, the *explanans* offered correctly appeals to the way things were, i.e. to irremediably past facts. Hence, such solution cannot be accepted by presentists, who generally eschew the

commitment to past and future entities.

*Reply:* the objection neglects two important aspects of the cross-temporal strategy. Firstly, the grounding relation at play in the cross-temporal solution is simply an operator, hence, strictly speaking, it is not committed to its relata, and, *a fortiori*, it is not committed to the existence of facts about the past. Secondly, the proposition used as *explanans* is a proposition that was true, but it is no longer such, given that the past irremediably past. Thus, the cross-temporal solution need not appeal to facts about the past that are, to a certain extent, still present; this should make the solution fairly acceptable by the presentists.

**(3) Risk of circularity:** in the case of Tallant and Ingram’s minimalist solution, it would seem that the explanation offered is exposed to the charge of circularity, and hence ultimately to be rejected. The circularity would rise as follows: in claiming that “⟨it was the case that p⟩ is true because it was the case that p”, the solution would simply restate the *explanandum*, without providing any substantial *explanans*.

*Reply:* although the minimalist solution might sound circular, it should not be considered as such. The minimalist could simply appeal to the use/mention distinction, and claim that the proposition is *mentioned* in the *explanandum* and *used* in the *explanans*. Roughly, a semantic fact is explained in virtue of a non-semantic fact. Such move will avoid the threat of circularity, while keeping the simplicity (and the efficacy) of the explanation offered by the minimalist.

## §6 Conclusions

In this paper, firstly I canvassed the grounding objection to presentism, and then I examined some of the most widespread solutions offered to solve it. Along the way, the grounding objection to presentism ended up in serving as a more general case study on the requirements of explanation of certain propositions: in fact, the true nature of the objection turned out to be essentially an explanatory challenge rather than a mere request of identifying truth-makers for propositions about the past. In the light of the importance attributed to the explanatory project, the truth-making principle is to be ultimately rejected: even if the existence of a certain entity makes a proposition true, it does not explain its truth. Put in different terms, the truth-maker constraint may be a necessary condition of a satisfactory explanation, but the principle alone is not sufficient.<sup>29</sup> Most importantly, explanations of propositions are also a representational matter: in addition to some wordly items, some grounds, something more is needed. For instance, semantic facts about the given proposition, like its meaning, help in providing an explanation for the proposition in question;

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<sup>29</sup>I would not go as far as to claim that explanations are *exclusively* a representational matter: for instance, causal explanations seem to be a clear case in which causes and effects need to have a wordly reference; on the other hand, in the case of propositions, such wordly item alone is not sufficient.

indeed, the mere existence of an entity that makes it true is not sufficient for explaining why it is true. That said, presentists that give up on the truth-making principle are left with two equally viable options: either embracing grounding in its more modest operational version, or going for more minimalist solutions, like Tallant (and Ingram). I leave to the reader the final decision: after all, the two solutions do not differ so much. They both dispense presently existing truth-makers, respect the independence principle outlined by Sanson and Caplan, provide more satisfactory explanations than their presentist counterparts and keep an eye on parsimony, simplicity and intuitiveness.

Let's take stock now. As things stand, presentist are faced with an important choice when it comes to explain the truth of propositions about the past. On the one hand, they can decide to inflate their ontology, under the false impression that merely positing new entities will do the explanatory work that needs to be done; still, hopefully, it should be rather clear now that this is not a viable route. On the other, presentists could enrich their explanatory sources, by claiming that explanations ought not to terminate exclusively in how the world is, but also in how it was. In doing this, they will benefit from leaving the world as simple as they find it, and from straightforward, intuitive and efficacious explanations of the truth of propositions about the past. The yielded result perfectly matches the desiderata I started off from: in the end, the preferred views not only accommodate the presentist main tenets, but they can also provide satisfactory explanations of the truth of propositions about the past.

Thus, concluding, presentism is certainly a debatable view about the nature of time, and it suffers of various criticisms; nevertheless, the grounding objection examined here, if addressed correctly, leaves the presentist position intact.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup>I am particularly grateful to Sven Rosenkranz for going through an earlier draft of the paper, patiently commenting it and helping me to improve it. I am also grateful to Esa Diaz-Leon, Roberto Loss and Luca Zanetti for fruitful conversations and emails about the topic.

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