

# Is Presentism Morally More Desirable than Eternalism? A Dialogue

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## *Abstract*

According to presentism, only what is present exists. According to eternalism, all past, present and future things exist. Hence, in presentism, although there was pain, past pain does not exist. In contrast, in eternalism, it is not only the case that there was pain; past pain exists. Given the intrinsic obnoxiousness of pain, presentism is therefore morally or existentially more desirable than eternalism. An argument along these lines has been proposed by Orilia and several objections to it have been put forward. A dialogue between a presentist who defends the argument and an eternalist who puts forward the objections is here constructed.

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In current philosophy of time there are two main competing ontologies (cf. Emery, Markosian, and Sullivan 2024). One is eternalism, according to which, objects and events of all times equally exist (tenselessly speaking), regardless of whether they are past, present or future. Its most popular version is the so-called B-theory, wherein there is no objective distinction between past, present and future. This appears to be in line with Einstein's relativity theory. The other is presentism, according to which, there is an objective present and only present objects and events really exist. It is a minority view, which appears to be in tension with relativity theory. It has however many supporters, especially because of its apparent vicinity to common sense.

I have offered an argument for the moral, or existential, desirability of presentism, based on the idea that, according to presentism, past pain does not exist, whereas it tenselessly exists, according to eternalism (cf. Orilia 2016a, 2018a, 2018b).<sup>1</sup> In former presentations of this argument, I consider a number of objections, which I then try to defuse; in particular, the *ugly history objection*<sup>2</sup> and the

<sup>1</sup> In Orilia 2012 (§6.2.5), there is an earlier hint of the argument, in connection with a discussion of Prior 1959.

<sup>2</sup> See Orilia 2016a (§2.3). In Orilia 2018a (§6) and 2018b (§5), it is called *the radical objection*. This problem originates from a comment by an anonymous referee of *The American Philosophical*

*ugly truthmaker objection*.<sup>3</sup> Despite these efforts, such objections have been refined and pressed more vehemently in recent works by Ernesto Graziani (cf. Graziani 2021) and L. Nathan Oaklander (cf. Oaklander 2024). Clearly, the argument is controversial, and these refinements are especially thought provoking and worth serious consideration. I thought then that it would be intriguing to see how a supporter of my line could reply to them. Accordingly, I have imagined a dialogue between a presentist who presents the argument and an eternalist who launches the objections. Upon reading a previous version of this paper, two anonymous reviewers for this journal put forward further stimulating objections, which I incorporated into the dialogue.<sup>4</sup> It is left to the reader how to side. Whatever the outcome, the hope is that this exchange may offer a perspective on the dispute in temporal ontology that contributes to our philosophical understanding. The dialogue follows.

### Part 1: The Presentist's Argument

Presentist: We can all grant, I think, that absence of pain and sorrow is more desirable than presence of pain and sorrow in a sense that we may call *moral*, since it has to do with the happiness and well-being of persons, or more generally of sentient beings, which in a moral perspective should have the highest consideration as an ideal goal; *ceteris paribus* it seems morally preferable to act as far as possible in such a way as to minimize pain and bring about joy in ourselves and the world surrounding us, insofar as it contains other persons or sentient beings.<sup>5</sup> Or perhaps we can at least speak of existential desirability in a sweeping sense of “existential”, which is meant to encompass the emotional and moral aspects of our lives.<sup>6</sup> Thus, in a nutshell, absence of pain is morally or existentially more desirable than presence of pain, or more generally, less pain is morally or existentially more desirable than more pain, *ceteris paribus* at least. If so, it can be argued, presentism is morally or existentially more desirable than eternalism. Let me explain why I think so; for brevity's sake I shall simply speak of *desirability* and leave the qualifier *morally or existentially* usually implicit. According to eternalism, past, present and future events all exist, they are part of reality, we may say. In contrast, according to presentism, only present events exist, they are the only events that are part of reality. Now focus on events involving people with feelings, thoughts, expectations, desires. Among them there are “pain events”, involving a suffering person, and “pleasure events” involving a person enjoying a pleasant experience. We may want to go back to pleasure events later, but for the time being look at pain events. If eternalism is true, there exist all the pain events that are past for us. We may

*Quarterly* (which rejected in 2014 a short paper with an earlier version of my argument), and was further elaborated by Ernesto Graziani in conversation.

<sup>3</sup> This was first presented to me by Gregory Landini in an email exchange. See Orilia 2016a (§2.2), 2018a (§5) and 2018b (§4).

<sup>4</sup> In forthcoming footnotes, I shall call them “the first referee” and “the second referee”, respectively, in line with the order with which their comments were conveyed to me.

<sup>5</sup> One could object here that joy may be morally outrageous if it is a sadist reaction to sorrowful events such as the suffering of an innocent person. In response to this, for the sake of the argument that is developed here, we can assume that such reactions are not included among the joyful events.

<sup>6</sup> This is taken almost *verbatim* from Orilia 2016a.

add that all the pain events that are future for us exist as well, but let us leave it aside; we do not know the future and we could hope for a better future with less or even no pain. Most importantly, consideration of the past is sufficient for my purposes. Thus, for example, consider *VT*, a victim of torture in a concentration camp during World War II. Given eternalism, *VT*'s terrible pain exists; it is part of reality, even though it is far from us in time, just as the pain of someone suffering now, but far in space from us here. On the other hand, if presentism is true, *VT*'s pain is not part of reality. It was, but it is not. It is a crucial difference, on which I invite you to reflect, while activating your empathic powers. I expect that this should result in an awareness that presentism is more desirable than eternalism. For you should see that there is more pain in reality with the truth of eternalism, than there is with the truth of presentism; and conversely less pain in reality with the truth of presentism than with the truth of eternalism: with eternalism all the past pain events are part of reality, and with presentism they are not. And, therefore, we should acknowledge that presentism is more desirable than eternalism.

Eternalist: I am not at all convinced by your argument for ontological reasons, which I shall bring forth in a moment. But before I do that, there is an obvious reaction that comes to my mind. By the same token, you should admit that, if presentism is true, all the pleasure events of the past do not exist, whereas these past pleasure events exist, if eternalism is true. And just as you granted that less pain is more desirable than more pain, you should acknowledge that more pleasure is more desirable than less pleasure. By this principle, you should then conclude that eternalism is more desirable than presentism!<sup>7</sup>

P.: Yes, right, I was about to bring it up myself and in fact I had anticipated that we should also talk of pleasure events. Surely I acknowledge that your counter-argument, which focuses on pleasure events, can be constructed, and it does lead in the opposite direction; it concludes that eternalism is more desirable than presentism, whereas my argument concludes that presentism is more desirable than eternalism. Thus, it seems we can't buy both. However, I claim, we can choose and prefer my argument: it weighs more than yours, because absence of pain is preferable to presence of pleasure. To see this, imagine that a powerful and malicious demon tells you that he is about to flip a coin to decide between two options. With heads, he will do nothing. With tails, he will make it the case that two people will experience some ineffable and paradisiac joy, while at the same time someone else will experience atrocious pain. What will you hope for? Certainly heads, even though with tails there are two lucky experiencers and only one sufferer. Analogously, I claim, you should prefer my argument and desire the truth of presentism, rather than of eternalism.

## Part 2: Truthmakers

E: Well, let us grant that; I'd say I would hope for heads and I think everybody, or nearly so, would say the same. But I want to press the ontological issue I had in mind. It seems you underestimate the crucial point that, as you say, *VT*'s pain *was* part of reality. That is, it is true that *VT* suffered. You admit that,

<sup>7</sup> This objection and the next rejoinder are considered in Orilia 2016a (§2.1), 2018a (§4), and 2018b (§3).

don't you? And similarly, I take it, you admit the truth of countless other past-tensed propositions that report about all the past evil that there was: propositions about wars, concentration camps, tortures, let alone pain and sorrow that do not depend on malicious human decisions, such as earthquakes, tsunamies, diseases and deaths of innocent children. You certainly want to agree that all such *past-tensed sorrow propositions*, as we may call them, are true. For after all, only if you admit that, you can claim what you need for your argument, namely, as we may put it, that our world really has an ugly history! Since the world has such an ugly history, then you want to say: wouldn't it be better if things are as presentism says they are, namely in such a way that the past does not exist? But it makes sense to say that the world has an ugly history only if we admit that the past-tensed sorrow propositions are true. And then I ask: what is the ground of such truths? Mustn't they have truthmakers, items in reality that make them true? I know that you presentists worry about the issue of providing truthmakers for past-tensed propositions, and answer in various ways that there are such truthmakers. However, in discussing this truthmaker problem, presentists concentrate on propositions that do not involve the obnoxiousness of pain on which you want me to focus. What you presentists consider are propositions such as these: that there were dinosaurs, or that Julius Caesar crossed the Rubicon; *past-tensed innocuous propositions*, let us say. For example, it has been claimed by *Lucretian* presentists that the universe has the property of being such that there were dinosaurs, or of being such that Julius Caesar crossed the Rubicon; and that such things are states of affairs whose existence makes it the case that the past-tensed propositions in question are true.<sup>8</sup> Or, to pick another approach, there is a *moderate* presentist who has claimed that past objects such as Julius Caesar or the dinosaurs do not really go out of existence, but merely cease to be concrete, and, as ex-concrete entities, presently have past-tensed properties, such as having-crossed the Rubicon; thereby generating states of affairs that make past-tensed propositions true. Thus, e.g., there is the state of affairs of the ex-concrete Julius Caesar's having crossed the Rubicon and this is the present ground, or truthmaker, of the past-tensed proposition that Julius Caesar crossed the Rubicon.<sup>9</sup> Fine. But then let us concentrate, rather than on innocuous propositions such as those, on past-tensed sorrow propositions, such as that VT suffered, and all the other ones that make us say that the world has an ugly history. If there are now corresponding states of affairs of the sort envisaged by the Lucretianist, or by the moderate, shouldn't we admit that such states of affairs involve the existence of pain in the world, right now, as part of reality? How can the world have now the property of being such that VT was tortured without there being now in the world all the pain involved in VT's torture? Or, worse perhaps, how can it be the case that VT has now the property of having been tortured without there being now in the world all the pain involved in VT's torture? In sum, it seems to me, once it is admitted that, if presentism is true, then the grounds of true past-tensed sorrow propositions are states of affairs that are now part of reality, presentism appears to be *less* desirable than eternalism.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Bigelow 1996.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Orilia 2016b.

<sup>10</sup> Here and in the next eternalist rejoinder I rely extensively on Oaklander 2024. In particular, in the next one I quote almost *verbatim* from its page 221.

For such grounds must involve sorrow which is *now* part of reality, insofar as such grounds are now part of reality. In contrast, for the eternalist, the grounds are the painful events themselves as located at the relevant past times. For example, suppose it is at some time in 1943 that VT was tortured, then it is at that time in 1943 that the event of VT's torture is located and this event is the ground, or truthmaker, of the past-tensed proposition which is now true, namely, that VT was tortured. Surely the sorrow involved in the event is located at the time at which the event is located, and this seems to me much better than having the sorrow located at the present time, as the presentist must have it!

- P: No really, this line goes off track, but it is great that you put it forward, since it gives me a chance to place in sharper light how presentism and eternalism differ ontologically and what consequence this difference has for the issue that we are discussing. Surely a presentist should acknowledge that true past-tensed propositions must have grounds, or truthmakers, in present reality, since according to presentism there is no reality other than present reality. Once this is admitted, a presentist may want to propose a view regarding what such grounds are, and accordingly we may have different versions of presentism, such as Lucretianism or moderatism. Or perhaps a presentist may prefer to remain neutral about which view of this sort to endorse and simply claim that one or another of such views must be correct, without committing oneself to any of them. However, to endorse any such view can never amount to acknowledge the very existence at the present time of the past events that according to the eternalist are located at past times. And it is only by having such events themselves at the present time that there can be the corresponding pain at the present time, if the events in question involve pain. For example, a presentist may admit that there is now, as part of present reality, the state of affairs of the universe's having this property: being such that VT was tortured, whatever this means. You may question this and ask what sort of property it is and how it can be the case that the universe has it, but you must understand that the existence of this state of affairs does not bring about the sorrow that was brought about when the torture took place. Only the existence of that torturing event can bring about that sorrow and the state of affairs postulated as truthmaker by the presentist should not be confused with the event itself. This can best be grasped by comparing the truthmaker to a film of the torture event which, let us suppose, was shot at the time of the torture. We now have the film and by watching it we may empathically be dismayed by it and feel sorrow, but that does not mean that the pain of the victim is brought back into existence by the film. That pain existed when the torture existed, but does not exist now. Similarly, if, as presentist, I bet on the existence of ex-concreta with past-tensed properties as truthmakers, I am not thereby committed to the existence now as part of reality of the pain that VT underwent when tortured. Again, the present state of affairs which is VT's having been tortured is comparable to a film shot when the torture took place. The existence now of that state of affairs does not bring into existence VT's pain. By being no longer concrete, VT cannot have any pain.
- E: Your comparison of a truthmaker to a film is revealing and shows that the presentist is caught in a dilemma. There are really two senses in which one can invoke truthmakers for past-tensed truths. In one sense, such truthmakers

are simply presently existing traces or remnants that testify, or certify, that the past-tensed propositions in question are true. For example, dinosaur bones testify that the proposition that dinosaurs roamed the earth is true. We may speak of *testimony* truthmakers in this case. In another sense, truthmakers are items that ground the truth of the propositions in question in terms of the very individuals, properties and relations that such propositions are about. Let us call them *ground* truthmakers.<sup>11</sup> Surely, if truthmakers are testimony truthmakers, then they cannot grant the existence of any roaming, or of any pain or sorrow, for that matter. That is, there being now dinosaur bones does not make it the case that there is any dinosaur roaming now on earth. Similarly, there being now a trace of VT's torture, say traces of VT's DNA left on a torture instrument, or even a film of the torture, does not make it the case that there is now the pain involved in the torture. But at the same time such traces do not really ground the truth of the past-tensed propositions in question, in particular the proposition that VT suffered. To have this, we need an event that involves the very person VT and VT's being tortured, and perhaps even the pastness of this event, since the proposition in question is past-tensed. Thus, the presentist has this dilemma. If there are true past-tensed sorrow propositions that have a truthmaker, even though there are no painful events, then there are really no ground truthmakers in a presentist ontology for such propositions, nor for the truth of the very proposition that there were painful events. The appeal to present states of affairs that testify to there having been past pains will not do, for such evidence presupposes the existence of the past. For the filming is evidence of the past only if there was something that occurred in the past, namely the past filming. What, then, is the ground of the past experienced event of the filming of the suffering? The evidence does not contain either the individual who did the filming or the filming itself. Thus, if the film itself is the basis of there having been the past event, then there is no ground for the past event. There is no ground truthmaker for there having been someone who did the filming even if there is a testimony truthmaker for it having taken place. On the other hand, if there is at present the ground truthmaker of a past filming experience, or the past painful event filmed, then that ground would contain a painful event, and the desirability of presentism vanishes.

P: It seems to me you were carried away by the film metaphor that I used. But that was only an analogy. The presentists who admit that true past-tensed propositions are made true by presently existing truthmakers, and count me as one of them, do not take such truthmakers to be testimony truthmakers such as films in fact are. But neither do the presentists take them to be what you call ground truthmakers, namely the very past events that occurred when the propositions in question were true. As I said, what the presentist proposes is that there are truthmakers of another sort, perhaps the state of affairs postulated by the Lucretianist, e.g., the universe's being such that Julius Caesar crossed the Rubicon, or perhaps the state of affairs postulated by the moderate presentist, e.g., Julius Caesar's having crossed the Rubicon. You seem to deny that there can be such options in between the two extremes of the testimony truthmakers and the ground truthmakers. But then you are really contesting the very possibility for presentism to provide truthmakers for past-tensed statements. You

<sup>11</sup> See Oaklander 2024: 219, where however testimony and ground truthmakers are called "truthmakers<sub>1</sub>" and "truthmakers<sub>2</sub>", respectively.

are saying *a priori* that no presentist attempt to provide truthmakers for such statements could succeed unless the truthmakers are the very past events that occurred when the propositions in question were true. But why should we think that presentism is really in this predicament regarding truthmakers? You are not really providing an argument here, it seems to me you are merely stating that nothing less than the past events themselves can work as truthmakers. But this really begs the question against presentism. You may say that to postulate states of affairs such as those envisioned by the Lucretianist or by the moderate will add an additional ontological baggage that the eternalist can avoid, but then the presentist can claim other virtues for his ontological perspective, and hence this critique cannot be the end of the matter.

### Part 3: Tenseless Existence and Duration

- E: I am afraid that I do not see other virtues that can really compensate for the loss of the ground truthmakers, but let us move on, because I suspect there is another problem with your argument and perhaps we may learn something from a further scrutiny. It seems to me that you fail to recognize an important distinction, namely the existence of suffering on the one hand, and its continuation, on the other hand. Suffering is morally relevant only as long as it endures. Now, from an eternalist perspective, past suffering does not *continue* to exist; rather, it exists tenselessly, confined to its temporal position. Just as we feel relieved when a danger is spatially distant from us, we feel relief when suffering is temporally distant, even if it still exists tenselessly (in essence, this is the basic point that Mellor raises against Prior's famous *Thank Goodness* argument).<sup>12</sup> The critical issue here is the distinction between tenseless existence and continuing existence. Julius Caesar exists and feels pain or joy at specific times, but it is not the case that Caesar continues to exist or continues to feel pain or joy. All that matters is the duration of the suffering; and there is no duration in an eternalist world. This distinction undercuts the core thesis that presentism has an inherent moral advantage.<sup>13</sup>
- P: Thank you, I really appreciate your effort to scrutinize my argument and indeed we can learn from your point. But what we learn is, I think, that we can see in an even clearer light the advantage that presentism has on eternalism. You are saying that, from an eternalist perspective, all events are localized at specific instants and thus tenselessly exist just at the instants at which they exist. And as such, this is how I understand you, they do not endure or continue in a temporal interval. Let us consider, for example, the torture undergone by VT from, say, time  $t_1$  to time  $t_{10}$ . This is made up by a VT's being tortured event at time  $t_1$ , a VT's being tortured event at time  $t_2$ , and so on, up to a VT's being tortured event at time  $t_{10}$ ; without there being, it seems you are saying, a torturing event continuing from  $t_1$  to  $t_{10}$ . (For simplicity's sake, we may think of these times as successive instants in a conception of time as discrete, nothing hinges on this, I surmise.) Now, suffering requires continuation, you urge, and hence there is no suffering. But think of it; if you were right, you would have proven not simply that presentism has no moral advantage, but

<sup>12</sup> See Prior 1959; Mellor 1981 (Chapter 3); Mellor 1988 (Chapter 2).

<sup>13</sup> The objections in this and in the eternalist replies of the forthcoming Part 4 are formulated by quoting almost *verbatim* from the report of the second referee.

that suffering does not exist at all in an eternalist world! Unfortunately, it can't be so. In fact, the continuation is there, and thus there is suffering even if we grant that suffering requires continuation (and by the way I am not convinced of that; why can't there be instantaneous pain, suffering concentrated at one instant?). The continuation is nothing but the existence of the sequence of torturing events at  $t_1, t_2, \dots, t_{10}$ . Hence, even if suffering requires continuation, this torture causes suffering. And this suffering tenselessly exists, if the sequence of torturing events tenselessly exists. The difference between the eternalist and the presentist world is as follows. In the presentist world at, e.g., instant  $t_5$ , the torturing event at  $t_4$  *existed* and the torturing event at  $t_6$  *will* exist. In contrast, in the eternalist world at, e.g., instant  $t_5$ , the torturing event at  $t_4$  tenselessly exists, and the torturing event at  $t_6$  tenselessly exists. And so there is in the eternalist world the tenseless existence of the suffering, which is not there in the presentist world.

#### Part 4: As-if Presentism

- E: Well, ... I am not sure I am convinced. But let us assume, at least for discussion's sake, the cogency of your replies. Still, I think there are serious problems, for you conflate psychological responses with ontological commitments. Consider that the feeling of relief when suffering ends is a subjective, psychological phenomenon. As such, it does not necessarily imply any metaphysical conclusion about the nature of time. At best you can claim that a world in which time is experienced *as if presentism were true* is preferable. This only supports the preferability of the illusion of presentism. Just like the illusion of evil is itself an evil, the illusion of the absence or cessation of evil is, at least morally, equivalent to the actual absence or cessation of evil. This means that the moral preference implied by your argument is not uniquely supportive of presentism, since the eternalist can also acknowledge that our subjective experience aligns with the kind of world that the presentist finds desirable. This psychological explanation is entirely compatible with eternalism, as it rests on our experience of temporal distance, rather than on the ontological erasure of the event.
- P: My dear eternalist friend, what you are saying amounts at bottom to this. Let me summarize. We experience the world as if it were presentist. That is, as far as our subjective phenomenology goes, past events do not tenselessly exist; they only existed. This doesn't mean that the world is presentist. The eternalist can surely provide an explanation of why the world feels presentist, compatible with the world's being in fact eternalist. Since we experience the world as if it were presentist, we think of past suffering as a suffering that existed, but that does not tenselessly exist. This is morally or existentially better than thinking of past suffering as tenselessly existing. And this is all the matters (it is irrelevant whether past suffering exists or not), and it is compatible with the world's being eternalist. Hence, you say, there is no reason to prefer a presentist world to an eternalist world. But think more carefully, and more empathically, please. True, we think of past suffering presentistically, so to speak, i.e., only as of something that existed, and not as something that tenselessly exists; by default, we may say. And perhaps this is why past suffering is bearable. However, the point of my argument is precisely to try and think of past suffering eternalistically, so to speak, i.e., as something that tenselessly exists,



and not simply that existed. We can do it, I claim. Even though, by default, we think presentistically. And once we do it, we should be dismayed by past suffering, as we see it as out there, as part of reality. No matter how reassuring the comfort zone of presentist default thinking is, to which we can go back.

- E: Perhaps I could strengthen my point, by appealing to an analogy between spatial and temporal distance. Just as we feel relieved when a danger is spatially distant from us, we feel relief when suffering is temporally distant, even if it still exists tenselessly. This analogy shows that the persistence of suffering in the tenseless sense does not diminish the relief felt when suffering is no longer present.
- P: It does not seem to me that the spatial analogy strengthens your point. Quite the opposite! It can be granted that, just as we feel relief by going spatially away from danger, we similarly feel relief by getting to be temporally distant from a past pain. But here the point is not relief and its causes. Relief has to do with the fact that the past pain *was* co-existing with me *then*, but it is not coexisting with me *now*. The point of my argument is to focus on past pain despite its not being co-existing with us now. Let us then resort to a spatial analogy with respect to *this* exercise. By default, we do not think of far-away suffering, since we think ‘nearistically,’ so to speak. However, we can get spatially close to that far-away suffering, and then it strikes us. It is just cynical to say: “who cares? I can go far away again”. When we are spatially close to the pain we should not like it. Similarly, if we think eternalistically of the pain (as tenselessly part of reality), rather than presentistically (as something that *was* part of reality), we should not like it!

### Part 5: History, Actual and Counterfactual

- E: I guess the problem is, I really cannot digest presentism. But let us try and move on. Let us set aside these additional problems that I raised and let us go back to the issue of truthmakers. Let us admit, at least for the sake of discussion, that there are present truthmakers for true past-tensed propositions; in particular sorrow past-tensed propositions. Let us further assume that such truthmakers do not bring about any present pain. Let us do this, since I really want to understand your initial argument for the desirability of presentism. Let us delve deeper into it. What you made was, we may say, a moral comparison between the actual world conceived of as presentist, and the same actual world conceived of as eternalist. And then you argued that the former is morally superior to the latter, because in the former past evil existed, but does not exist, whereas in the latter, it not only existed, but it exists *tout court* (even though it does not exist *now*). But then one could urge: what really matters in the moral evaluation of a world is its history, what *has happened*, independently of the ontological difference of the two worlds, that is, that one is presentist, and the other is eternalist. If in both of them the same tragedies and sorrow have taken place, if they share the same ugly history, which, for instance, includes alas the Holocaust, then we should give an equally negative moral judgement of both. Don’t you think so?
- P: You correctly remark that history is relevant in the moral evaluation of a world: we should certainly prefer that the Holocaust had not happened. Hence, we could say, a counterfactual world without the Holocaust is *ceteris paribus* preferable to the actual world with the Holocaust. Nevertheless, we should not

forget the crucial difference between the fact that *there was*, e.g., a torture in Auschwitz, and the fact that this torture is part of reality. The actual presentist world and the actual eternalist world share the fact that there *was* the torture, but only in the eternalist world the torture is part of reality, so that the pain of this torture exists. To put it otherwise, we agree that the proposition *VT suffered* is true, and we also agree that to ponder *now* on this proposition leads to contempt, empathic sorrow and a negative judgement on the history of our world. However, given presentism, VT's pain is not part of reality, and this should induce a preference for eternalism; for with the latter this pain is part of reality just as much as the pain of those who are tortured now, but are not seen because they happen to be spatially distant from us.

- E: Perhaps I can bring my point home with this mental experiment. Compare the actual eternalist world with a counterfactual presentist world with a morally worse history, e.g., because of a longer duration of WW II, and ask yourself which one is better. I think you reply that the eternalist world is better, despite the fact that the quantity of additional evil in the counterfactual presentist world is tiny, as compared to the enormous quantity of past evil that is part of reality in the eternalist world. If this is true, the moral value of a world depends on its history and not on its ontology, whether presentist or eternalist; in the light of this, it is wrong to uphold that presentism is morally more desirable than eternalism.<sup>14</sup>
- P: This mental experiment may well incline us to increase the weight that we accord to history in the moral evaluation of a world. Nevertheless, we should see the moral argument for presentism as mainly an argument that doesn't regard counterfactual worlds, but our actual world with *its* history. From this perspective, it is essential how we ontologically consider this history. If we see it in presentist fashion, past pains do not exist. In contrast, if we see it in the eternalist way, they do exist, and they are comparable to spatially distant pains existing now. And this should lead us to prefer presentism.
- E: Perhaps with a further more refined mental experiment, I can convince you that the ontic status of the past is not relevant for the moral evaluation of a world, since what counts is only history. Imagine now a gradual counterfactual worsening of a presentist world with the goal of wondering whether there is a threshold after which the counterfactually worsened presentist world appears to us less preferable than the actual eternalist world. One could think, for example, that the threshold is crossed with a minimal worsening, such as someone's breaking her big toe by accidentally hitting a table leg. I am inclined to think that this is the case, which would show that the ontic status of the world is irrelevant. Suppose in fact it is enough to add in the presentist world such a minimal additional pain, infinitesimally small as compared to the past pain in the actual eternalist world. Then, the fact that such a pain exists, in addition to its having existed, is irrelevant. Let us concede, however, that the worsening should be ample and significant for it to cross the threshold in question. Say there should be a three months extension of the abuses and murders in a Nazi concentration camp. Even in this case, one should conclude that the ontic status of past evil is irrelevant, since the additional sorrow that we are

<sup>14</sup> Ernesto Graziani pressed this point in conversation, and I have replied to it in Orilia 2016a, 2018a, 2018b, along the lines of the next presentist rejoinder.

imagining remains gigantically inferior to all the past evil of the actual eternalist world. It does not matter that this evil has not only existed, but also exists, whereas, in the presentist world it has existed, but does not exist.<sup>15</sup>

- P: Even though it is extremely interesting to mobilize and evaluate our emotional reactions to such counterfactual worsenings, it seems to me that in the last analysis my argument in favor of a superior desirability of presentism remains unscathed. It disturbs us to imagine that there was more suffering than what in fact there was. It can be objected, however, that an increase of past suffering should increase the desirability of presentism, rather than inducing the thought that it is irrelevant whether the world be eternalist or presentist. We could even acknowledge that, in facing the alternative between a presentist world with a history worse than the actual one, and an eternalist world with our actual history, our capacities for empathy and moral judgement prevent us from preferring the former. Above all, however, this would show something about the way we tend to judge, rather than something about the ontic status of the world. For the more we imagine a worsening of past history, the more we should prefer that the world be presentist. In fact, given presentism, the additional pain that we are imagining is simply a suffering that was, but is not. And, conversely, the more we imagine an improvement of past history, the less superior presentism appears to be, when compared to eternalism, with respect to moral desirability. Up to the point that, if we imagine a past of absolute goodness with no suffering, we should perhaps prefer eternalism, or at least the pastist or growing block view, according to which the past and the present only exist and the future does not.<sup>16</sup> In fact, the argument for the moral desirability of presentism relies on the empirical assumption that there was suffering. In the counterfactual hypothesis of a world without past suffering, we could not derive the superior moral desirability of presentism over eternalism.
- E: If you put things that way, what you are really saying is that the preferability of presentism empirically depends on the ugliness of actual history. This is why it would be wrong to compare a counterfactually worsened presentist world and an eternalist world with the actual history.
- P: Precisely, I think you got my point. Given how things were, presentism is preferable.
- E: And, thus, you think that the ontological status of past evil (and future evil, I would add) is relevant for evaluating the world. However, in the end, after all we said, I must confess it is not clear to me to what extent the history of the world itself matters. If I focus on a comparison between a presentist world with a considerable amount of past evil and a counterfactual eternalist world where the amount of past (and thus existing) evil is minimal, I have mixed feelings. On the one hand, if I focus on the existing evil, I think we should prefer the presentist world (assuming that there is relatively little evil at present, as compared to all the evil of the past). On the other hand, if I consider the history, I think we should prefer the eternalist world, because there has been little evil in the past. What should we choose between the two? Should we prefer the ontological status or the history in this case?<sup>17</sup>

<sup>15</sup> This is the refinement of the ugly history objection pressed in Graziani 2021.

<sup>16</sup> On growing-blockism, see, e.g., Emery *et al.* 2024 (§6).

<sup>17</sup> Here I report almost *verbatim* a worry raised by the first referee.

- P: The point is that you should compare temporal ontologies in the same counterfactual scenarios and then the issue of preferability need not have a clear-cut yes/no reply, and it may rather be a matter of degrees: a counterfactual increase of past pain implies a higher desirability of presentism; a counterfactual decrease of past pain implies a lower desirability of presentism. In an ideal world with no evil, we may even say that eternalism is more desirable. Given our actual history, I claim, there is a very high desirability of presentism. This is the main point after all, and I am afraid that I have no more to offer in order to convince you of that, at least as far as the issue of past pain is concerned. Perhaps I should put forward a line of a completely different nature, if you let me ...
- E: You make me curious, although, you know, I should soon go back home.

### Part 6: Concluding Speculations and Final Greetings

- P.: Let me at least voice it, it is a while that it is buzzing in my mind. Given presentism, the future is open, whereas, given eternalism, the future is fixed. Thus, there is a sense in which, in deliberating situations, the presentist can feel like a free agent who could have done otherwise, whereas the eternalist cannot. And a deliberating agent is indeed free, if presentism is true, in a sense in which she is not, if eternalism is instead true. The recognition of a positive value for this sort of freedom may further support the claim that presentism is morally or existentially more desirable than eternalism, I guess.<sup>18</sup> But I realize that you are running out of time, and all that talk of pain and sorrow was already too taxing, wasn't it?
- E: Dear presentist, strangely enough, this time we agree about time: there isn't enough of it for me to reply. My train is in half an hour, and we are too tired. But be assured that there is *a lot* to reply ... Maybe next week I have a chance to pass by, and we may ponder this over a cup of tea, or coffee, if you prefer. As of now, let me only ask you this: why should we care about this moral desirability after all? Something might be desirable and yet false, we experience it all the time! Or perhaps you dare say that in this case moral desirability entails truth? That would be really hard to sell!
- P: Well, I wish I were such a good seller, someone who could argue that at some fundamental metaphysical level *ought* implies *is* and values must be realized.<sup>19</sup> But I don't think I am that good. Still, consider this. I don't know if God exists, but, if God exists, shouldn't the world be presentist? For after all, my argument has it that, with eternalism, the problem of the compatibility of a benevolent God and the existence of evil increases, whereas it decreases with presentism. Hence, such a God must have decided to create a presentist world.
- E: This is some speculation. Not so very interesting to me, but I admit some theologians may want to think it over.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>18</sup> This point relates to how I see the connection between the issue of free will and the presentism-eternalism debate (see Orilia 2016: §3).

<sup>19</sup> For a perspective of this sort, see Leslie 1979.

<sup>20</sup> An argument analogous to mine has been discussed in a theological context; see Mullins 2014 and Page 2023, as well as the references therein.

- P: I definitely think they should. But apart from theologians, consider those who see the presentist-eternalist dispute at a stalemate from a purely theoretical point of view, and are then undecided on what to believe. Couldn't they perhaps *decide* to believe that presentism is true, if they become convinced of its greater desirability?
- E: Could somebody really *decide* to believe anything on account of its desirability? You remind me of Pascal's *Wager* argument for the existence of God (cf. Pascal 1670: Article III, §233), and of William James' "will to believe" (cf. James 1979). I am highly suspicious of such perspectives. Since we know that reality is not always aligned with our desires, even if we wanted the world to be presentist, it doesn't follow that we would manage to believe that it is.<sup>21</sup> At any rate, the fact is, I am firmly convinced that eternalism is true. You know, relativity theory, ... But I enjoyed chatting with you. So long, my friend.
- P: Yes, it was fun. Thanks for bearing with me. See you next week, perhaps...<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> This sentence quotes almost *verbatim* from the report of the first referee, who was especially explicit on this point.

<sup>22</sup> Previous versions of this paper were presented at *Philosophy Across the Boundaries - XXV World Congress of Philosophy*, University of Rome, August 1-8, 2024, and at *The Natures of Time*, University of Milan, February 10, 2025. I wish to thank Massimo Dell'Utri, who was present in Rome, for suggesting a submission to *Argumenta*, and the two anonymous referees whom he recruited as editor; they greatly contributed to improve this piece with their critical comments. I would also like to thank Ernesto Graziani for innumerable conversations on this topic and other temporal matters, and Yazan Freij, Ikuro Suzuki, Jonathan Tallant, Giuliano Torrenco, who were present in Milan and provided interesting considerations.

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