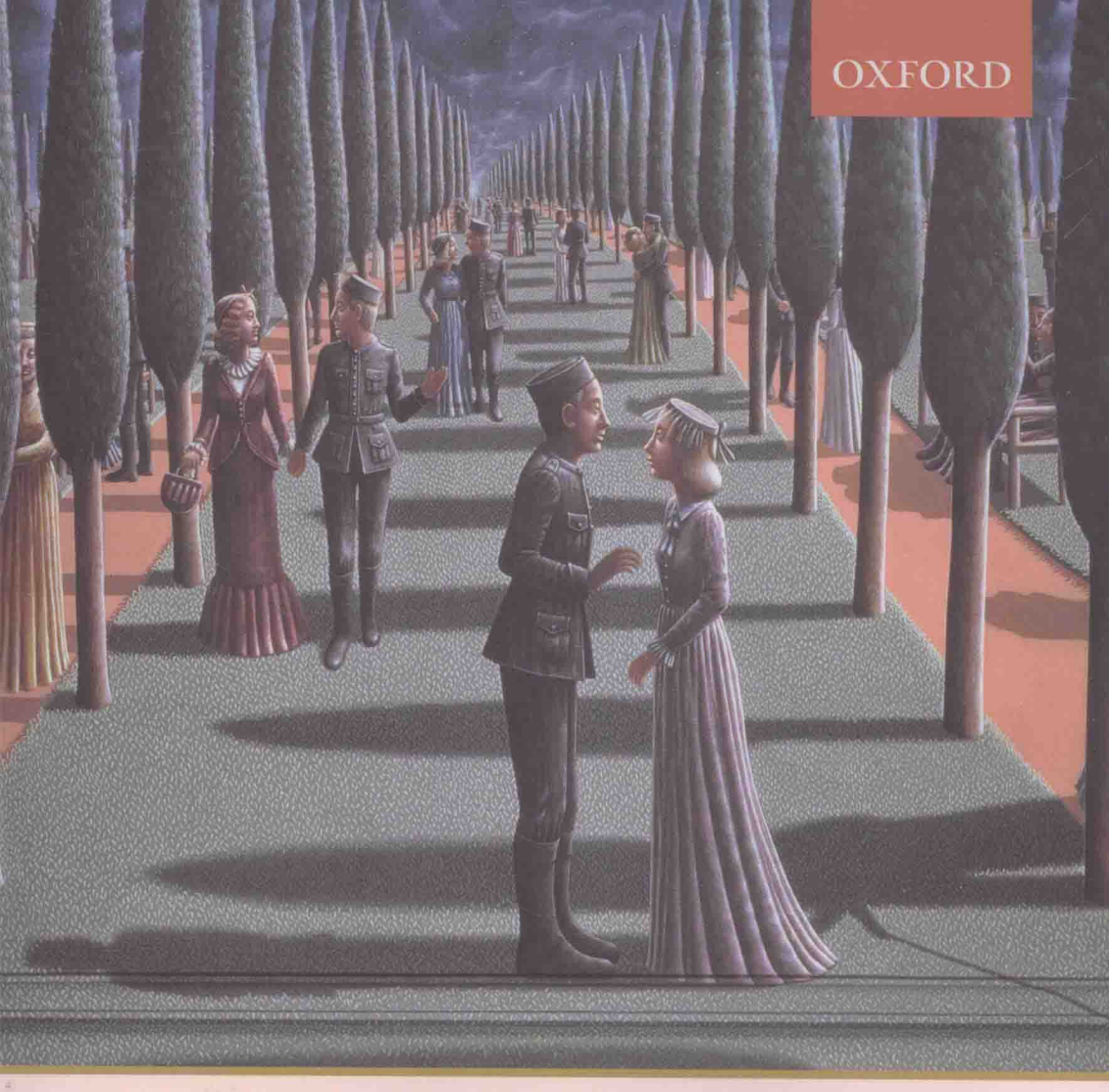

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TIME, LANGUAGE, & ONTOLOGY

The World from the B-Theoretic Perspective

M. Joshua Mozersky

OXFORD STUDIES OF TIME IN LANGUAGE & THOUGHT

Time, Language, and Ontology

The World from the B-Theoretic Perspective

M. JOSHUA MOZERSKY

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Time, Language, and Ontology

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To Carol-Anne and Jacqueline
In eternal love

General Preface

The series *Oxford Studies of Time in Language and Thought* identifies and promotes pioneering research on the human concept of time and its representation in natural language. Representing time in language is one of the most debated issues in semantic theory and is riddled with unresolved questions, puzzles, and paradoxes. The series aims to advance the development of adequate accounts and explanations of such basic matters as (i) the interaction of the temporal information conveyed by tense, aspect, temporal adverbials, and context; (ii) the representation of temporal relations between events and states; (iii) human conceptualization of time; (iv) the ontology of time; and (v) relations between events and states (eventualities), facts, propositions, sentences, and utterances, among other topics. The series also seeks to advance time-related research in such key areas as language modelling in computational linguistics, linguistic typology, and the linguistic relativity/universalism debate, as well as in theoretical and applied contrastive studies.

The central questions to be addressed concern the concept of time as it is lexicalized and grammaticalized in the different languages of the world. But its scope and the style in which its books are written reflects the fact that the representation of time interests those in many disciplines besides linguistics, including philosophy, psychology, sociology, and anthropology.

Philosophical discussions concerning the nature and properties of time underlie many different kinds of inquiry in contemporary metaphysics, linguistics, logic, epistemology, psychology, and anthropology among others. In this volume Mozersky addresses fundamental temporal questions, defending the objective conception of time. In particular, he supports the view that past, present, and future events are all equally real (*eternalism*), challenging in the process some proposals developed in the philosophical literature such as that only the present exists, or only the present and the past but not the future exist. He presents arguments in favour of the *tenseless* theory of time, according to which tenseless propositions, that is propositions whose truth values are not relativized to time, constitute the meaning of tensed (in the semantic sense of the word) sentences. The fact that *tense*, understood in philosophy as temporal location in the past, present, or future, is evidently present in thought and language is explained by appeal only to earlier-than/later-than relations, which places this account within the B-theoretic camp in the ongoing debates between A-theorists (supporters of *tensed* reality) and B-theorists (supporters of *tenseless*

reality). Finally, Mozersky successfully attempts to combine his tenseless theory with the view that time really passes, without resorting to such problematic explanantia as the non-relative past, present, or future: everything to do with time and change derives from the temporal ordering of events.

Kasia M. Jaszczolt and Louis de Saussure

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1

Introduction

Time, tense, and the objective conception

John Campbell writes:

> There is a distinction that philosophers and psychologists have tried to draw between different ways of thinking about space... It is sometimes called, and I will call it, the distinction between *absolute* and *egocentric* space. But it is not a distinction between different types of regions. It is a difference between ways of representing, or thinking about, a particular region... Intuitively, the distinction is between thinking about space as a participant, as someone plunged into its center, as someone with things to do in that space, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, thinking about the space as a disengaged theorist. (Campbell 1994, p. 5)

A similar distinction can be drawn with respect to time. To think about time as a participant is to think of time in a way that is centred on the present. For example, past actions can be remembered and future actions anticipated, but to act is to do something right *now*. When time is examined from the point of view of the disengaged theorist, however, the present seems to fade way, not into oblivion but, rather, into a sea of similar moments. So, from the egocentric, or subjective, point of view, the present is unique or at least special in some way; from the absolute or objective[1] point of view, the present is just one time amongst other equals.

Since our language draws the distinctions between past, present, and future by the use of grammatical tense, these two perspectives on time are often called *tensed* (in place of egocentric) and *tenseless* (in place of objective) theories or accounts (see, for example, Oaklander and Smith 1994). The philosophy of time, however, contains a debate that has no real analogue in the philosophy of space, namely whether or not time is *in fact* centred; that is, whether or not the present is unique in some way as opposed to merely being experienced as such. Philosophical disputes over the nature of space long ago left behind the idea that space contains a privileged position or

[1] Because 'absolutism' is the name given to the view that space or time exists independently of objects and events, I will use 'objective' to refer to a view of time that does not privilege any moment.

centre, so one would be hard pressed to uncover a recent account of space that attempts to single out the 'here' as anything more than that location amongst similar others that happens to coincide with a speaker or some other reference point.

This is not to say, however, that the egocentric and objective perspectives of space are easily or simply integrated. As Campbell continues:

> The idea of absolute space sometimes appears in discussions of self-consciousness. When self-consciousness is conceived in this way, it can seem dizzying. What it demands is that one should build up a synoptic picture of the world, one that wholly abstracts from one's own place in the throng, and then somehow identify one of the people so pictured as oneself. What is dizzying is the kind of complete objectivity, the degree of abstraction from one's own busy concerns, that is required. A first interpretation is that what is wanted is a kind of top-down view, so that we think in terms of a kind of aerial photograph, and then one has to identify oneself as one of the people shown in the photo. But that would not be enough, for it would only give the viewpoint of the photographer, and we need a picture of the world that is objective, in that it is not from any viewpoint at all. (Campbell 1994, p. 6)

If self-consciousness requires a view from nowhere (Nagel 1986), then it might seem that self-consciousness is impossible. One approach would be to suggest that:

> we do not need any kind of objective conception in order to be self-conscious. Immersed, as we are, in the thick of things, we have no need or use for such a conception in our everyday lives, whereas self-consciousness in commonplace. So an objective conception is not demanded by self-consciousness. (Campbell 1994, pp. 6–7)

Campbell thinks that we need and use the objective conception of space (Campbell 1994, p. 7). Note, however, that this is a problem of reconciling two systems of representation and neither Campbell, nor anyone else I am aware of, seriously considers that the objective conception is impossible because a particular region is singled out by nature as objectively centred or 'here'. Such a response is simply not a live option in debates about the structure of space and our representations of it.

Again, the situation is different in the philosophy of time. Not only do philosophers ask whether we can coherently form a tenseless conception of time (e.g. Teichmann 1998, Stoneham 2009), but they regularly debate whether time itself could be tenseless; that is, whether or not the present time could be just one time amongst many, similar others, or whether the present is both experientially distinguished from other times, as is the here, and *ontologically* distinguished as well. For example:

> One common way to present the issue is in terms of what is required for a complete description of reality. Suppose we provide a complete tenseless description of reality; we say what happens when, and in what order, but without any appeal or orientation towards the present time. We may then ask: is the description complete? Or is it a further fact, not implicit in the description itself, that I am *currently* sitting, for example? (Fine 2005, p. 265; see also Mellor 1998, Oaklander and Smith 1994, Sider 2001)

So there are two issues that need to be considered. The first is ontological: is the objective conception of time true; that is, is time like space in lacking a 'centre' or privileged position? The second is conceptual/representational: is the objective conception of time possible?

Note that the answer to the latter question might be negative even if the answer to the former is positive. That is, it may be that, as in the third quotation from Campbell above, though time itself has no position of privilege, it is nonetheless impossible to form this perspective on time. On the other hand, one might argue that while the present is ontologically distinct from other times, we are able to abstract from this fact and form an objective conception of time; in this case, the objective conception might be a useful heuristic for some theoretical purposes but ultimately must be treated as a metaphor or an approximation. Others (e.g. Craig 1996, Ludlow 1999, Smith 1993) argue that the semantic and ontological questions cannot be separated: an utterance of 'it is very bright now' *entails* that the time of utterance is mind-independently present, so we can only avoid commitment to an egocentric vision of time on pain of denying the possibility of speaking truthfully about it (see Chapters 4 and 5 for further discussion).

The goal of this book is to defend both the possibility and truth of the objective conception of time and then to examine some of the implications of this viewpoint.

I begin with the ontological question. Eternalism is the view that all times and their contents exist equally; in other words, position in time is not existentially relevant. I defend this view negatively, that is by examining the various ways one might go about denying it. Broadly speaking, there are two families of views here: those, first, according to which the present and past exist, but the future does not; and those, secondly, according to which only the present exists.

Chapter 2 addresses the first family of views and argues that they all suffer from a similar kind of problem: they are unable to bear their own ontological weight. What I mean by this is that these views are built around models of the world that are, I argue, incompatible with propositions about time that are essential to these very views.

Chapter 3 considers presentism, the second kind of denial of eternalism. I argue that presentism suffers from a problem much like that of the empty future views: a model confined to what exists now simply cannot support all the claims about time that the presentist wishes to make. Hence, I conclude that attempts to temporally restrict ontology are unsatisfactory. Before proceeding, however, I consider two additional rivals to eternalism that do not fall neatly into the division above. First, I address the 'moving spotlight' view (Skow 2012) according to which all times exist equally but the present is highlighted, singled out as objectively NOW, as if a universal spotlight shines upon it; I argue that this view is in fact analogous to eternalism but with additional difficulties, so should be rejected. Secondly, I consider a recent suggestion from Kit Fine (2005, 2006), according to which

there is no unified reality so there can be no single model that is adequate to it; while this may seem like an extreme view, Fine argues that the reality of temporal passage strongly suggests it. I agree wholeheartedly that the passage of time is a real phenomenon, but I argue that Fine's way of preserving it is unpersuasive.

So I conclude that the objective conception of time is true. Nonetheless, I grant that we couldn't do without tensed thought and language because they are essential to timely interactions with the world. How can we account for this if eternalism is correct and reality is not demarcated along tense lines? A second worry arises here as well: if tensed language and thought are ineliminable, can we be sure that a tenseless conception of time is available to us after all; might we be fooling ourselves if we suppose we can think ourselves outside the confines of the present moment? To answer these questions we must address the relationship between tensed language and the world; we must, in other words, turn to semantics.

In Chapter 4 I present an account of tensed language that is both compatible with its ineliminability and, I argue, entirely tenseless. By the latter I mean that the truth conditions of our utterances involve only the temporally invariant, B-series relations '*x* is earlier than *y*', '*x* is simultaneous with *y*', and '*x* is later than *y*' (McTaggart 1908). These relations suffice to define a temporal order on all events, including our utterances and thoughts, but they fail to pick out any time as ontologically privileged or objectively NOW; hence the proper semantic account of tensed language is tenseless. I conclude that we in fact possess the linguistic tools to express the eternalist model.

In Chapter 5 I address the question of why the present is privileged in perception and action. I present an account that is limited to the eternalist ontology but, I argue, explains why we plan and perceive the way we do; all that is required is a tenseless, temporal ordering of events and some basic assumptions about our causal interactions with the world.

The conclusion I draw from these two chapters is that tenseless theories offer the best explanations of why we speak, think, and act as we do—i.e. in tensed terms—with respect to time. We can fully explain why it is that at any moment at which we are thinking or speaking, that particular moment is privileged in language and thought, and we can do this without ontologically privileging any moment. It is in this sense that I consider the view from nowhen to be coherent and the objective conception to be possible for us.

The notion of indexicality features prominently in the arguments of Chapters 4 and 5. I argue that tensed thought and action are fully explicable in terms of different relations speakers and thinkers bear to one and the same temporal context (and, indeed, content), which is a view that draws heavily on classic work in the semantics of indexicals (such as Perry 1979 and Kaplan 1989) and applies it to a variety of temporal considerations. This is important because the indexical account of the subjective point of view can, I believe, be extended to the cases of spatially and

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