Presentism, Truthmaking, and the Nature of Truth

Abstract:

A recent presentist strategy has been to deny that truths about the past need presently existing truthmakers. These presentists don't deny that such truths need grounding; they hold that each truth about the past is true because of how the world *was*, not how it is. This paper argues that this position faces two problems, one of which can be overcome by adopting a certain view of the property of truth for propositions about the past. The second problem cannot be solved. The upshot is that this form of presentism is not a theory of truthmaking for propositions about the past. Rather, it is a theory about why such truths need no present grounding that is motivated by a novel theory of truth.

1. Introduction

Many philosophers are attracted to the following three theses:

Presentism   Everything that exists (unrestricted), exists presently.

Truthmaker   For every proposition p, if p is true, then there exists something that makes p true.[1]

Past Truth   There are true propositions about how things were in the past.[2]

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[1] Some do not like the idea that every truth depends on what exists. **Truthmaker** can be substituted for a weaker 'truth supervenes on being' (**TSB**) principle that still gives rise to the inconsistent triad insofar as it requires the presentist to hold that past truth supervenes on presently existing entities and the present distribution of properties. **TSB**: For every true proposition p, there is no change in p's truth without a change in what exists or how it is.

[2] Cameron (2011) and Caplan and Sanson (2011) set up the discussion in a similar way. By 'propositions about how things were in the past' I mean to include propositions about what existed at a time in the past and what properties were instantiated at a time in the past. I do not include so-called 'soft' facts about the past, i.e., those truths that also refer to or have as constituents present or future entities and times, e.g., <In 1000, John runs in 2019>, or cross-temporal comparative claims like <Lincoln was taller than Caesar>. '<p>' will be used to refer to 'the proposition that p' throughout.

It is well-known that there is a problem with maintaining all three theses. Presentists hold that only presently existing entities exist and hence that there are no entities existing at past or future times. If the presentist takes some propositions about the past to be true, then, by **Truthmaker**, they are committed to there being truthmakers for those truths. The problem is apparently that there are no plausible presently existing truthmakers for past truths. Take the truth <there were pterodactyls> for example. It is by no means clear what presently existing entity could ground this truth. Those who think past events are equally as real as the present time can say that existence of pterodactyls in the late Jurassic period is the proposition's truthmaker. But this is off-limits to the presentist since the state has constituents, e.g., pterodactyls and the Jurassic period, that do not presently exist. So presentists are thought to face the 'grounding problem', i.e., the problem of explaining how truths about the past can be grounded given the truth of presentism. In other words, this is the problem of how one can accept **Truthmaker** given a commitment to **Presentism** and **Past Truth**.

Many presentists have tried to solve the grounding problem by postulating novel presently existing entities to ground truths about the past.[3] My focus will not be on these approaches, but rather on those that deny that truths about the past need presently existing truthmakers at all. On the view I'll be considering, truths about the past have no present truthmakers, yet they are not brute or inexplicable. Each truth about the past still depends upon being. They are true in virtue of the way things *were*, not how it *is*.[4] Call such

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[3] See Bigelow (1996), Bourne (2006), Crisp (2007), Cameron (2011), Rhoda (2011), Caplan and Sanson (2011), and Fiocco (2014) for such solutions. See Keller (2004), Kierland and Monton (2007), and Tallant and Ingram (2015) for discussion of some of these views.

[4] Baia (2012), Tallant (2009a; 2009b; 2010), Tallant and Ingram (2015), and Westphal (2006) appear to hold this view. Merricks (2007) is an interesting border case: he thinks truths about the past depend on being in an insubstantial way. However, he denies that truthmaking applies to truths about the past. The presentists I have in mind hold that truthmaking still applies to truths about the past. Baron (2015) discusses 'middle road' presentism, which is similar but not exactly the same the form of presentism I will focus on. These presentists

presentism 'no present ground' (NPG) presentism (section 2). In section 3, a problem is raised for NPG presentism regarding how it explains the present grounding of truths about the past. A solution to this problem is offered in section 4. I argue that the NPG presentist should adopt a certain view of the property *being true* when had by propositions about the past, viz. it is a property that such propositions must be made to have, but that once gained, it cannot be lost. Then they can say that if p is made true at t, then p continues to be true at every time after t without the need for an existing truthmaker. Section 5 then raises a more challenging problem for NPG presentists regarding how truths about the past are grounded *in being*. NPG presentists, I argue, must admit that such truths do not presently depend upon being. Section 6 takes stock of NPG presentism. I argue that NPG presentists should give up the claim that truths about the past are grounded in being. What they should say is that such truths were grounded and remain true despite their lack of present grounding on account of the nature of truth for propositions about the past. An interesting upshot of this is that NPG presentists are committed to a form of truth pluralism.

Full disclosure: I'm not myself a presentist, NPG or otherwise. My intent in writing this paper is to reveal the real nature of NPG presentism. It is not, as it is advertised to be, a theory of truthmaking for propositions about the past. Rather, it is a theory about why such truths need no present grounding that is motivated by a novel theory of truth.

2. True in Virtue of How Things *Were*

NPG presentists refuse to postulate new and unfamiliar entities to solve the grounding problem.[5] They do not countenance ersatz times, past-tensed properties, temporal

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do not attribute to the past *any* sort of positive ontology (either existence or being), unlike Baron's middle road presentist.

[5] See Baia (2012), Tallant (2009a; 2009b; 2010), Tallant and Ingram (2015; 2017), and Westfall (2006).

distributional properties, God's memories, or the past as a fundamental aspect of being as truthmakers for truths about the past. Nevertheless, NPG presentists think that all truth depends upon being. Instead of holding that for every truth there presently exists something that grounds it, NPG presentists hold that "[h]ow things were *grounds* how the truths *are*; truths about the past are true *in virtue of* how things were" (Tallant and Ingram 2017: 970). NPG presentists respond to the grounding problem by rejecting **Truthmaker** and replacing it with a similar principle that maintains its motivation, viz. truth's dependence upon being, that is congenial to presentism. They adopt a tensed truthmaker principle such as:

P-Truthmaker   For every proposition p, if p is true, then there either was or is

something that makes p true.[6]

Adopting a principle like **P-Truthmaker** allows the presentist to explain the truth of, for instance, <there were pterodactyls> in terms of how the world *was* back in the Mesozoic era. That era and its inhabitants used to exist, but no longer do. That pterodactyls used to exist is sufficient to ground the truth of <there were pterodactyls>. Baia offers a similar example:

> [W]hen the last dinosaur went out of existence, the truthmaking relation ceased to
> hold between it and *that there was a dinosaur*. But it was then true that this relation had
> held, and this is sufficient for our treating *that there was a dinosaur* as grounded on
> Presentist Truthmaker. (Baia 2012: 352)

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[6] See Baia (2012) and Tallant and Ingram (2015; 2017) for similar principles. **P-Truthmaker** only applies to past and present truths but could be reformulated to apply to future truths. I won't consider that issue here since it is controversial whether there are future truths. The **TSB** counterpart to **P-Truthmaker** would be: **P-TSB** For every true proposition p, there was/is no change in p's truth without a change in what did/does exist or how it was/is.

This strategy purportedly allows the NPG presentist to ground the truth of past propositions without inventing new entities and without denying that there are truths about the past, thus solving the grounding problem.

3. A Problem

NPG presentists make a curious claim: the past does not exist; it has no being, yet truths about the past are *presently true* and *presently grounded* in the way the world was. It is one thing to claim that truths about the past *were* grounded when they stood in a relation of truthmaking to certain existing entities, but no longer are given the non-existence of those entities. It is another thing to claim that such truths are presently grounded despite the non-existence of what they are said to be grounded in (cf. Cameron 2018). In other words, what is missing from the NPG presentists account is an explanation how we may regard truths about the past as presently grounded and not merely as *having been* grounded. This demand does not beg the question in favor of the **Truthmaker** requirement that all truths presently stand in a relation of truthmaking to some existing entity. What is being demanded is an explanation of how truths about the past continue to be presently grounded on NPG presentism, not a demand that they be given present truthmakers.

To understand this worry, consider a somewhat different form of dependence that NPG presentists Tallant and Ingram call 'non-rigid' dependence, which they describe as follows:

The basic idea is, if x depends on y…there's some time at which x depends on y for its existence. But this needn't continue to be so. A dependence relation may hold between x and y at some time, but the relation needn't always hold. If x non-rigidly

depends on *y*, then *x* can't exist without *y* having existed (at a time, i.e., the initial existence of *y*). So, there's a sense in which *x*'s existence is 'fixed' (or 'determined') by *y*'s having existed, even though *y* exists no longer—*x*'s existence is guaranteed by the initial existence of *y*—and so we have a dependency that's *not* existence-entailing. (2017: 974)

But describing *x* as depending for its existence on *y* is merely shorthand for a more complex explanation that undercuts the claim that there *is* a non-existence entailing dependency between *x* and *y*. *x*'s existence is determined by *y*, *when x and y both exist*. But *x* continues to exist after *y* ceases to exist. That means that *x*'s *continued* existence is due, not to *y*, but to *x* itself (or something other than *x* and *y*). Once we distinguish initial from continued existence, there is no sense in postulating a non-existence entailing dependency between *x* and *y*. Similarly, for truth. To explain how the truth of <there were pterodactyls> depends upon the way the world was requires not only any account of the existence-entailing relation between the proposition and the world in the past, but also an account of how the proposition *continues to be true* despite the non-existence of what grounded its truth.

4. A Solution

What is the NPG presentist to do? I think they should adopt a certain view of the property *being true* that is had by propositions about the past. They should adopt the maxim that when it comes to truths about the past, "once made true, always true." More precisely, they should hold that *being true*, when had by such propositions is a property that can only be gained at a time in virtue of its bearer standing in the truthmaking relation to some entity,

but may continue to be instantiated even after that time, even after ceasing to stand in a relation to that entity or any other. On this view of truth, no proposition about what was would be presently true were it not made true at an earlier time. The truth of such a proposition, they should say, is a mark of its original grounding, i.e., truth is the sign that a proposition about the past stood in the truthmaking relation to something at an earlier time and that it correctly represented reality at that earlier time.

This view is not an ad hoc buttress for NPG presentism. It is implied by the central commitment of such presentism, viz. truths about the past are now true because they were grounded. Indeed, the view is implied by the quotes from Baia and Tallant and Ingram given above. But why think that *being true* is a property of truths about the past that cannot be lost once gained? Propositions depend for their truth only on what is relevant to them; plausibly, they depend on what they are *about*.[7] Truths about the past, if they are about anything, are about what happened at past times and not about what happens at times after that.[8] It follows that past truths do not depend for their truth on what happens at later times. Hence, no truth about what did exist can lose its truth because of what happens at a later time. A fortiori, no truth about the past will lose its truth because its truthmaker goes out of existence at a later time. If this is denied, then we must say that what goes on in the world at t_2 can change the truth-value of a proposition about an earlier time t_1. But if truths about the past are supposed to correctly represent or reflect the way things were, then this would have the intolerable consequence that what the world was like at a time is dependent on what the world is like at a later time. In a word, if a proposition about the past is made true at a time,

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[7] The notion of aboutness is a difficult one to clarify. See Rasmussen (2014) and Yablo (2014). Here I assume that a proposition is about its subject matter, but not necessarily that every truth stands in an aboutness relation to something existing. See also Merricks (2007).

[8] Recall, again, that by truth about the past, I mean true propositions about what existed at a time in the past and what properties were instantiated at a time in the past.

then it continues to be true at subsequent times because what happens at those subsequent times has no bearing on its truth-value.

This view allows the NPG presentist to hold that <there were pterodactyls> was made true when pterodactyls came into existence; these creatures stood in the truthmaking relation to that proposition at that time. But once they went out of existence, as per presentism, the proposition remains true at subsequent times because of the nature of the truth of that kind of proposition. One might respond by saying that what happens after the Mesozoic era must be relevant to the truth of <there were pterodactyls> since after that time the proposition's *truthmakers* no longer exist, which are the very things relevant to its truth. This objection misses the point. The point is this: only what's going on in the world *at a time* is relevant to a truth of a proposition about what's going on in the world *at that time*. What the world is like after the Mesozoic era is irrelevant to the truth of <there were pterodactyls>.

One might worry, as Cameron (2018) seems to, that when pterodactyls were present, <there were pterodactyls> was not yet true. So how could pterodactyls have made true this proposition? The presentist could argue that any time after pterodactyls came into existence, <there were pterodactyls> is true, so that proposition is true even while pterodactyls existed. But this strategy does not obviously generalize to all truths about the past; some become true only after their alleged ground becomes non-existent. Instead, the NPG presentist could explain the initial truth of propositions about the past as follows: the existence of pterodactyls at t_1 grounds the truth of the present tense proposition that <there are pterodactyls> at t_1. This proposition then goes from true to false at t_2, when pterodactyls go out of existence at t_2. However, because of the truth-value links between present tensed

propositions and past tensed propositions, the truth and then falsity of <there are pterodactyls> entails the truth of <there were pterodactyls>.[9]

The NPG presentist could then endorse an entailment principle (at least for contingent truths) on which if T makes true p and p entails q, then T makes true q (cf. Armstrong 2004: 10). Then we would have an account of the truth of <there were pterodactyls> in terms of the truthmaking connection between the existence of pterodactyls and <there are pterodactyls> plus the truth-value links between tensed propositions. That would give the NPG presentist what they need: an account of the initial grounding of truths about the past despite the non-existence of its alleged grounds at the time the proposition becomes true.

Another concern is that this account makes *being true* a strange property. It would seem to have two different profiles, one at the time of instantiation and one at subsequent times. At the time of instantiation, *being true* would be relational: it is a property gained in virtue of its bearer standing in a relation to some entity distinct from it at that time. On the other hand, *being true* has to be monadic at times after its original instantiation since it does not remain instantiated at subsequent times in virtue of its bearer continuing to stand in a relation to something.[10] The account does have this consequence, but it seems not to be problematic for this particular reason. There are other perfectly legitimate properties that have this same nature. Think of *being true* by analogy to entities that depend for their *coming into* existence on something but not their *continued* existence on that thing. I causally depend on my parents for my coming into existence, but once in existence, I may continue to exist

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[9] Since I'm engaging with an objector who thinks past tensed propositions become true only after their ground goes out of existence, it is technically the proposition <there were (but are not) pterodactyls> that is entailed here. Thanks to a referee for pointing this out. Even this objector should still agree that <there were (and still are) pterodactyls> is true in the time interval between t_1 and t_2.

[10] Compare with Merricks (2007: 182) and Edwards (2018: 170) who think truth is a non-relational yet extrinsic property.

even if they cease to exist. Similarly, the properties *being an orphan* and *being an only child* both seem to be initially instantiated in virtue of their bearers standing in a relation to some entity, but at later times continue to be instantiated despite the non-existence of that entity (or even any surrogate). So in response to the worry that *being true* is a strange property, the NPG presentist can say that there are many other properties that exhibit the same feature of being relational at instantiation and monadic at later time, which are not objectionable for that reason.

Adopting this view of the nature of truths about the past allows the NPG presentist to motivate another, presentist friendly principle of truth grounding. **Truthmaker** entails the following principle of truth grounding:

Continual Grounding For any true proposition p and any time t: if p is true at t, then p stands in the truthmaking relation at t to some entity.[11]

This principle requires all truths to have an existing truthmaker at any time those propositions are true. NPG presentists should restrict **Continual Grounding** to truths about what presently exists (and perhaps others) but emphatically deny that the principle applies to truths about the past. Instead, they should adopt the following principle regarding the grounding of truths about the past:

One-Time Grounding For any true proposition p about the past and any time t: if p is made true at t_1, then p is true at t_1 and at every time t_n after t_1.

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[11] N.B. **Continual Grounding** does not entail that the entity exists at t; it may exist at an earlier time. It entails that if a proposition p is now true, then p has a truthmaker at some time or another (past, present, or future).

This principle lets the NPG presentist hold that <there were pterodactyls> can be true from t_1 to t_2 even if it has no truthmaker at t_2, as long as it had a truthmaker at t_1. Such truths are not grounded by having a truthmaker at each time they are true; rather these truths are grounded by having been made true at a time and by maintaining their truth in virtue of the nature of their truth itself: no proposition about the past would be true if it were not made true at an earlier time. Its present truth is an indication of that earlier grounding in an entity.

5. Another Deeper Problem

NPG presentists offer their solution as a presentist friendly way to articulate how truths about the past depend *upon being*. But there is reason to doubt that they are successful in this. Consider the sort of explanation for the truth of <there were dinosaurs> that Baia gives:

> 'Please explain why *that there were dinosaurs* is a true proposition. How is its truth value explained by the world?' Now suppose that the presentist responds: "Well, let me tell you how the world was some 100 million years ago: Dinosaurs existed. So that explains the truth of that proposition.' Should the grounding advocate be satisfied with this explanation? I see no reason why she should not be satisfied… The grounding advocate demanded an explanation, in terms of the world, for the truth of *that there were dinosaurs*. And she got one: The world was such that dinosaurs existed. (2012: 348)

Now think about what resources the NPG presentist has to explain the truth of <there were dinosaurs>. Not any ontology; that much they grant. Instead, they simply have other *truths* about how the world *was*. What explains the truth of <there were dinosaurs> is the truth of <<that there were dinosaurs> used to have a truthmaker>. But appealing to other truths to explain the truth of <there were dinosaurs> is not an explanation of its truth in terms of the world. It's an explanation of truths about the past in terms of other truths about the past.[12]

Similarly, for Tallant and Ingram who say, "<it was the case that *p*> is true, because it was the case that *p*" (2015: 356). This cannot be a genuine explanation on NPG presentism. For what occurs on the right-hand side of the 'because' cannot refer to a state of affairs on presentism; the most it can denote is another truth: <it was the case that *p*>. But '<it was the case that *p*> is true, because it's true that <it was the case that *p*>' is no explanation at all. Tallant and Ingram might resist giving any analysis of 'it was the case that p' so as to avoid taking 'was' with any ontological seriousness (as they seem to admit in their 2015: 326 and in Tallant 2009: 424). But this is stonewalling rather than providing a genuine explanatory stopping point. It's in effect saying truth about the past depends upon being but refusing to say any more about that dependence or the being upon which the truth is said to depend.[13]

Here is another way to think about the problem for the NPG presentist. Take two presentist worlds W and W* in which the only difference is that in W but not W* <x

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[12] Baia (2012: 353) thinks this regress is of a kind with the regress faced by non-presentists truthmaker theorists. For instance, he claims that <<that there are aardvarks> has a truthmaker> also sets off a regress for the non-presentists truthmaker theorist. But the comparison is inapt. Standard truthmaker theorists can point to the existence of aardvarks and their relation to the proposition <that there are aardvarks> to ground the claim about what makes <<that there are aardvarks> has a truthmaker> true. At every stage of the regress, the non-presentist truthmaker theorists can identify an entity involving a bit of ontology to ground the relevant proposition. The NPG presentist has no similar recourse. All they have are other truths about the way the world was, which as I've been arguing does not discharge the responsibility to explain the truth of past tensed truths in terms of the world.

[13] See Baron (2015: 929) and Asay and Baron (2014) who argue that the truthmaker principle cannot be reduced to a schema like 'for any *p*, *p* is true because *p*.'

existed> is true.[14] Now what explains the difference between these worlds? Not any ontology since the ontology of W and W* is the same. It is simply a difference in which propositions are true. That is the only resource NPG presentists have to differentiate the worlds. NPG presentists will insist that there must be a difference in what *did exist* in W and W*. But the only way they have to account for what did exist is the past tensed truths of a world, nothing else. Insofar as the NPG presentist's explanation of truths about the past only appeals to other truths about the past, they have not accounted for the present dependence of past tensed truths *on the world*.

6. Taking Stock

Where does this leave the NPG presentist? Here's the best thing for them to say: truths about the past did depend upon being but no longer do. Hence, they are not presently grounded in the world. Now this might look like a retreat from the tensed truthmaker principle **P-Truthmaker**. In one way it is. Truths about the past did, but no longer do, fall within the scope of truthmaking considerations.[15] Of course, the only resources the NPG presentist has to explain this is other truths about the past, e.g., truths about what entities did ground the truth of certain truths about the past. However, the NPG presentist can find some solace in the fact that the restriction of the truthmaker principle has not been ad hoc or unprincipled. They need not say that truths about the past lack truthmaker solely on the basis of their sparse ontology.[16] Rather the nature of truth of propositions about the past is the driving force behind the restriction. Truths about the past were grounded—they did

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[14] Baron (2013) considers a case like this one and uses it, ultimately, to argue against presentists attempts to provide presently existing grounds for truths about the past.

[15] Baron (2015) comes to a similar conclusion: if presentists are unwilling to attribute some positive ontological status to the past, then it collapses into what he calls 'hard road' presentism, the view that truths about the past need no truthmakers; they fall out of the scope of the truthmaker principle.

[16] Tallant and Ingram admit that their methodology begins with their ontological commitments (2017: 970). I think they should not do this. The proper methodology should also include reflection on the nature of truth.

depend upon being—at their initial grounding by standing in a relation to something existing in the world. But the continued instantiation of the truth of propositions about the past is guaranteed by the nature of their truth. It is just the sort of property that needs no continual grounding after its initial grounding.

The adoption of this view of truth and of **One-Time Grounding** helps mitigate the concern that truths about the past objectionably float free of being. Truths about the past are not in the scope of truthmaking for the NPG presentist. But we should not expect them to presently depend upon being given the nature of truth for propositions about the past.

One interesting consequence of this strategy for the NPG presentist is that it commits them to pluralism about truth. If they endorse **Continual Grounding** for truths about what presently exists, then they hold that truth for these propositions is such that it remains instantiated only if the proposition stands in a truthmaking relation to some entity. Endorsing **One-Time Grounding** for truths about the past entails that truth for these propositions may remain instantiated despite not being related by a truthmaking relation to some existing entity. One and the same property cannot both require and not require continual grounding for instantiation. So the NPG presentist must think that there are a number of distinct truth properties or that there is one truth property that can be realized or determined by different properties with different instantiation profiles. Either way, NPG presentism is committed to some form of truth pluralism.

Tallant and Ingram (2017: 976) acknowledge that their presentism may commit them to truth pluralism, though they express some doubt. They hold that different truths depend on the world in different ways. Given that it is in the nature of truth to depend, it would seem to follow that there are multiple ways of constituting truth, i.e., multiple ways of being true. This may be one route to truth pluralism for Tallant and Ingram. But the above

reflection shows that there is another more secure route to truth pluralism: the commitment to the view that some truths require continued relation to an entity to be instantiated and others do not. Regardless of whether a plurality of forms of truth dependence commits them to truth pluralism, different instantiation profiles for different truth properties (or truth realizers/determiners) does commit them to truth pluralism.

NPG presentism was advertised as a way to ground truths about the past without any extravagant ontological commitments. But what the above discussion reveals is that the view has a different character than advertised. It can offer no theory of the grounding of truths about the past in being. But it can explain why such truths need not be presently grounded in being if it embraces the view of truth outlined here. Such a view of truth is defensible and already seems implied by what NPG presentists say about their view. This view of truth, I argued, entails some form of truth pluralism. In sum, NPG presentism may not be what its defenders take it to be, but it does illustrate some important connections between the nature of truths about the past and presentism.[17]

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