

Good-Bye Growing Block

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I. Three Theories

Eternalism says that all times are equally real. Objects existing at past times and objects existing at future times are just as real as objects existing at the present. Properties had at past times and properties had at future times are had just as much as properties had at the present. Indeed, there is no metaphysical difference at all between past, present, and future. They differ only as a result of one's perspective, akin to the way "right here" differs from "over there." And so the eternalist takes 'the present' to be an indexical, like 'here' or 'this place'. With all this in mind, let's say that the eternalist believes in a *subjective present*.

Presentism says that only the present time is real. Every object that exists, exists at the present time. Objects that exist only at other times—like objects that exist only in fiction or objects that exist only in other "possible worlds"—simply do not exist at all. Moreover, an object has only those properties it has at the present time. The difference between past, present, and future is metaphysical, not perspectival. With all this in mind, let's say that the presentist believes in an *objective present*.

The *growing block universe* theory of time says that the past is real. In this much, growing block agrees with eternalism. But, according to growing block, the future is not real. In this much, growing block agrees with presentism. As time passes, according to

growing block, the sum total of being increases. And the “growing edge” of being is the present.

These are not the only logically possible views of time. Someone might, for instance, defend a “shrinking block universe,” according to which only the future and present exist, the present being the “shrinking edge” of being. But eternalism, presentism, and growing block are typically regarded as the only live options.¹ Of the three, growing block has the fewest defenders. I shall argue that it should have none.

II. Growing Block and ‘the Present’

Growing blockers agree with eternalists about the nature of the past. They believe that past times are just as real as the present time. Thus they believe that just as you are sitting in the present reading this paper, so—for example—Nero is sitting in the past watching a gladiator bout. And just as you think to yourself “I am sitting here at the present time,” so Nero thinks to himself “I am sitting here at the present time.”

To further clarify this point, let’s consider some remarks by a prominent growing blocker, C. D. Broad. Broad claims that as something goes from being present to being past, nothing intrinsic to it changes. The only change is relational. Thus Broad:

¹ Eternalists include Lewis (1986), Quine (1960), and Sider (2001). Presentists include Bigelow (1996), Markosian (2003), Merricks (1999), and Zimmerman (1998). Growing blockers include Broad (1923) and Tooley (1997).

Perhaps my “live options” should include a fourth view, one that endorses the reality of past, present, and future (like eternalism) but adds that there is an objective present, moving from past to future. (Broad (1923, 59) described this as the “policeman’s bull’s-eye” view of the present.) I suspect there is no coherent story to be told about what, according to this view, *being present* amounts to. Moreover, I think this paper’s argument against growing block can easily be adapted to undermine the policeman’s bull’s-eye view of the present.

It will be observed that such a theory as this accepts the reality of the present and the past, but holds that the future is simply nothing at all. *Nothing has happened to the present by becoming past except that fresh slices of existence have been added to the total history of the world.* The past is thus as real as the present. On the other hand, the essence of a present event is, not that it precedes future events, but that there is quite literally *nothing* to which it has the relation of precedence. (1923, 66; first emphasis added)

And:

When Queen Anne's death [first came into existence], it came into relations with all that had already [come into existence], and to nothing else, because there was nothing else for it to be related to. All these relations it retains henceforth and forever. As more events [come into existence] it acquires further relations, which it did not have, and could not have had while those events were non-existent. *This is all that ever happens to the event in question.* (1923, 82; emphasis added)

Suppose Broad is right about the nature of time. Then, when Nero's thoughts are present, no event exists that is later than them. When Nero's thoughts are past, they are related to later events. But the *intrinsic nature* of those thoughts never changes. So *what it is like* to be Nero sitting in the Colosseum is the same whether that sitting is present or past. This is a result of any view that agrees with the eternalist about the nature of the past. And so it's a result of every version of growing block.

Given growing block, *what it is like* to be Nero sitting in the Colosseum is the same whether that sitting is present or past. Of course, Nero is not (any longer) on the growing edge of being. So what are we to make of Nero's thoughts like "I am sitting here at the present time"? The most obvious reply is that Nero is—and forevermore will be—thinking *false* thoughts, *falsely* thinking that he sits at the growing edge of being.

I think this most obvious reply is uncharitable to growing block. For consider that you think "I am reading this paper at the present time." If 'the present time' refers to the growing edge of being, you ought to conclude that your own thought is false. After all,

given growing block, once you have a thought, you continue to have that thought forever. That thought is on the growing edge of being for just the briefest moment and is thereafter and forever not on the growing edge.² As a result, the probability that your thought is on the growing edge is vanishingly small. Thus if Nero is wrong, then so—almost certainly—are you (cf. Braddon-Mitchell, 2004). That is an unwelcome result.

Happily, there is a more charitable reply to be made on behalf of the growing blocker, a reply that does not imply that each and every thought explicitly about the present is virtually always—and so almost certainly—false. This reply invokes the above distinction between the *objective* present and the *subjective* present. Growing blockers should say that Nero’s thoughts like “I am sitting here at the present time” are always about the *subjective present*. Such thoughts can be true even though Nero is not at the growing edge of being. Similarly, growing blockers should also say that nearly all of everyone else’s thoughts about “the present” are about the subjective present too.

None of this should be too surprising. After all, the growing blocker shares some of the eternalist’s views, specifically, those about the nature of the past. And the idea of a merely subjective present—the idea that ‘the present’ is an indexical—is part and parcel of eternalism. Thus it is not a big surprise to see this idea pop up in a view like growing block, which has other areas of agreement with eternalism.

Of course, the eternalist says that the subjective present is the only present. But the growing blocker cannot say this. She thinks that there is also an *objective present*: the growing edge of being. (Whenever growing blockers explain their view, they use ‘the

² Suppose the growing edge has no temporal extent. Suppose a thought about the present cannot occur instantaneously. Then the growing blocker might have to concede that thoughts about the present are never—not even for an instant—on the growing edge of being.

present’ to refer to this growing edge (Broad, 1923, Ch. 2; Tooley, 1997).) As a result, even though we typically and nearly always mean the subjective present by ‘the present’, there is at least one context—that of elucidating the growing block—when it is used to refer to the objective present.

The growing block theory of time has two results. First, there are *two notions* of the present—objective and subjective—and ‘the present’ is correspondingly ambiguous (cf. Sider, 2001, 21-25). Second, ‘the present’ typically means the subjective present. ‘The present’ means the growing edge of being rarely, perhaps only when the growing block theory itself is being discussed.

III. Motivation by Conflation

The growing blocker must distinguish the subjective present from the objective present. A corollary of this is that she must distinguish the *subjective future* from the *objective future*. The subjective future follows the subjective present. (Some of the subjective future almost certainly exists; some of it does not yet exist.) The objective future is not yet part of being. Relatedly, the growing blocker must distinguish the *subjective past*, which precedes the subjective present, from the *objective past*, which precedes the objective present.

Given growing block, our typical thoughts about the present are about the subjective present. Likewise, given growing block, our typical thoughts about the future are about the subjective future. For you are surely right when you say: “My death is in the future.” But then—given growing block—you had better be talking about the

subjective future. After all, for all you know your death (like Nero's) is in the objective past. Indeed, that your death is thus like Nero's is the safe bet. For, given growing block, you shall be saying "my death is in the future" for an eternity, but during that eternity your death will be in the objective future for the mere passing flicker of a human life.

Typically, our thoughts about the future are about the subjective future. Indeed, given growing block, it seems we have thoughts about the objective future only when we are thinking about the growing block theory itself. It is only philosophers of time, while they are discussing growing block, who use 'the present' to mean the growing edge. Similarly, it is only they who use 'the future' to mean only the non-being that is yet-to-be. Given the growing block theory of time, all of us most of the time, and most of us all of the time, use 'the future' to mean the subjective future.

Suppose the growing block view is true. Then the "ordinary" present is the subjective present. The "ordinary" future is the subjective future. And—presumably—the "ordinary" past is the subjective past. The objective past, objective present, and objective future are, in contrast, technical devices for spelling out the growing block theory. I suppose that 'past', 'present', and 'future' are bad names for these technical devices, names likely to encourage a conflation of those devices and everyday life's past, present, and future.

This conflation is not merely hypothetical. Tooley opens his defense of growing block with: "The view of time according to which the past and the present are real, but the future is not, is a very natural one" (1997, 1). But there is nothing natural at all about Tooley's theory, since the everyday notions of *past*, *present*, and *future*—which are

subjective according to growing block—are not those in terms of which Tooley’s theory is defined. Tooley’s theory appears natural only given the conflation just noted.

Broad also proceeds as if the growing block view is intuitively attractive and quite natural. But—once we distinguish the subjective present from the objective present—we should find his way of proceeding misguided. To take just one example, consider Broad’s discussion of “tomorrow”:

If we ask what fact judgments ostensibly about the future refer to, we must answer that there is no such fact. If I judge to-day that to-morrow will be wet, the only fact which this judgment can refer to, in our sense of the word, is the fact which renders it true or false. Now it is obvious that this fact is the wetness or fineness of to-morrow when to-morrow comes. To-day, when I make the judgment, there is no such fact as the wetness of to-morrow and there is no such fact as the fineness of to-morrow. (Broad, 1923, 73)

Broad assumes that growing block delivers the unreality of tomorrow. But growing block cannot guarantee the unreality of tomorrow any more than it can guarantee the unreality of your death.

I can see why one might desire a theory of time that guarantees that one’s death and a week from Thursday are unreal, but provides for the reality of one’s most recent birthday and the present. But such a theory is not to be had. For a theory tailored to satisfy these and similar desiderata would be nothing other than the growing block. But—I have argued—the growing block fails to satisfy them. The desire for a theory of time that makes the past real but not the future is like the desire to eat one’s cake but also have it. It is understandable and incoherent.

IV. UGH

Consider the *unmotivated growing hunk* universe theory of time ('UGH' for short). According to UGH, the past and present are real. But UGH adds that a small part—and only that part—of the future is real too: the next ten years. Thus UGH seems to differ from growing block only with regard to the objective present's relation to the growing edge of being. UGH places the objective present ten years behind the growing edge, while growing block identifies it with the edge itself.

But this seeming difference is no difference at all. For UGH and the growing block agree that the growing edge of being is the growing edge of being. And they also agree that what trails the growing edge by ten years trails the growing edge by ten years. Any further disagreement is merely a difference in what is stipulated about the words 'the objective present' and not a disagreement about the nature of time. (Growing block stipulates that 'the objective present' means the growing edge; UGH stipulates that 'the objective present' means the slice of being ten years behind the edge.) Insofar as it is a theory about time—as opposed to a convention about how to use 'the objective present'—the growing block is UGH.³

The growing block is UGH. It is also UGH₁₁, the view according to which reality encompasses all and only the past, the present, and the first eleven years of the future. And it is UGH₁₂... and so on. And so it is no more or less misleading to say that, according to this view, the present is the growing edge of being than it is to say that, according to this view, the present trails the growing edge by ten years. As a result, I conclude that growing block/UGH/UGH₁₁ is not intuitively natural or attractive. It is

³ That is, the growing block is UGH if the past is infinite. They might differ if the past is finite, since UGH—unlike standard growing block—suggests that time started off with ten years of being. But even if the past is finite, there is no difference at all between UGH and non-standard growing block, according to which time first came into existence with ten past years.

wholly unmotivated. Growing block/UGH/UGH₁₁ is like “shrinking block.” It is logically consistent but should not be a live option.

V. Frying Pan to Fire

Growing blockers might object that their claim that the objective present is right at the growing edge differs substantively from UGH’s claim that it is ten years behind. The disagreement between growing block and UGH—they might insist—is not over merely what is stipulated regarding ‘the objective present’.

This objection makes sense only if we have some intuitive grasp of the objective present. It makes sense only if the objective present is something more than a technical device. Presumably, this objection presupposes that the objective present is our ordinary, pre-theoretical, intuitive notion of the present, the notion learned at our mother’s knee.

Growing blockers who insist that the objective present is the mother’s-knee present can differentiate growing block from UGH. More generally, they can resist most of my objections above to growing block. After all, those objections assume that—given growing block—our ordinary notion of the present (along with that of the past and the future) is the subjective.

But these growing blockers thereby return to the aforementioned “uncharitable” interpretation of their view. They must concede that the far and away most probable conclusion is that you believe an out-and-out falsehood when you believe “I am reading this paper at the present time.” Similarly they must concede that in all likelihood the mother’s-knee past—which they should identify with the objective past—includes your death, tomorrow, and even the human outposts on Mars settled early in the fourth millennium.⁴ (Indeed, they must concede that any event in one’s *subjective* future—no

⁴ Growing blockers might claim that our mother’s-knee notion of the present is a mix of subjective present and the growing edge of being. This is the worst of both worlds. For it implies that there is some truth

matter how many thousands of years it is after today—is in all probability in the *objective* past. For that event will enjoy an eternity in the objective past but only finitely many years in one’s objective future).

As I said earlier, the growing blocker should find such results unwelcome. They are also ironic. For this way of “saving” the growing block goes counter to the ideas typically advanced in its favor. In saying this, I do not deny that this way guarantees that—given the growing block—the future does not yet exist though the past and present do. However, this way of saving the growing block does not guarantee the non-existence of your death or tomorrow or outposts on Mars a thousand years hence. Indeed, this way of saving the growing block implies that, in all probability, your death and tomorrow and the Martian outposts are in the past. Nothing could be further from the spirit that animated growing block in the first place. And so even if we “save” growing block by distinguishing it from UGH, growing block is still wholly unmotivated. It is still like “shrinking block.” Again, it should not be a live option.

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both to the charge that growing block is no better than UGH and also to the charge that growing block makes it overwhelmingly probable that tomorrow is in the past.

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