

Metaphysics // Fall 2016

Handout 13

Tense: Prior

Remark 1. ‘Tense’ refers to the locutions ‘past’, ‘present’, ‘future’. Hence problems of tense are problems of the A-series.

TIME PASSAGE. Prior begins by questioning whether time passage is just a metaphor. If it is genuine, then time must pass at a certain rate. But what rate can that be? Easier to say that this is all metaphorical talk, a flowery expression of a trivial truth. If time passes, its rate is trivial to discover: the lecture lasts for an hour, and it passes at exactly the rate of one minute per minute.

It may be strange how a change can be at 1 min/min, but Prior complains that there is another oddity here—namely that events change at all. Why not to say that events happen, but *things* change? Things change by changing their properties. This seems entirely natural: e.g., you might say:

Brad Pitt has changed. (13-1)

What you mean is that Brad Pitt got older, or thinner, or more tanned. Correspondingly, you could say:

Brad Pitt’s ageing has happened. (13-2)

And you mean nothing but that Brad Pitt has aged. Therefore, events themselves are changes, but they do not change.

But this is not very accurate either. Ageing is a change, but it also changes: Brad Pitt’s ageing could be slow or quick. Raining can be more or less intense. The lecture event can be more or less boring.

NO EXISTENCE, NO CHANGE. All of that may be true, but our real problem remains. For the change we are interested in is a *temporal* change. We are supposed to endorse the view, advocated by McTaggart, that events change from the future to the present and on to the past. Yet how can that be? Is a future event—say, my breakfast tomorrow—changing now, getting closer? Is the American election getting more distant by the day? It seems that only presently existent events can change. This means that temporal change is impossible.

It is hard to assess Prior’s claim here. He reasons by analogy with things. Brad Pitt is changing, maybe so, but Marlon Brando is not. Brando is dead and not susceptible to any change. A change in future individuals is even more problematic, since there may not be determinate individuals for us to attribute change to them. But then this is not how we usually approach temporal change. We say, for instance:

The meeting is getting closer, (13-3)

or:

My childhood is receding into the past, (13-4)

or even better:

I have now come to the end of my autobiographical sketch. To continue it would be exceedingly difficult. To keep up the sequence of events I should have had to speak of years, circumstances, people, and destinies within the framework of the Revolution. Of a world of hitherto unknown aims and aspirations, problems and exploits, a new self-restraint, a new strictness—new trials with which this world confronts the human personality and man’s honor, pride, and endurance.

This unique world, the like of which has never been known before, has now receded into the faraway distance of memories and hangs suspended on the horizon like mountains seen from a plain or like a faraway big city against the smoky background of a red sunset. (Pasternak)

These expressions do not strike us as unintelligible, ungrammatical. It is possible to maintain that other locutions of change in the past or future events *are* unintelligible, just as they are when applied to objects. Temporal change may be a unique exception.

‘IT IS THE CASE THAT’. At all events, Prior’s next suggestion is that tensed verbs can be replaced by by tenseless verbs supplemented with a tensed modifier. Instead of saying:

Trump won the election, (13-5)

we could say:

It was the case that Trump wins the election. (13-6)

That we have tensed verbs at all is an historical accident. This suggestion is completely sound—because we have an actual language, Chinese, that has exactly these constructions (or so I am told).

What is change, on this account? The fact that something was the case and is no longer. That is:

There is a change iff for some p , it was the case that p , and it is not the case that p . (13-7)

But this suggests that change, after all, is predicated of events. That is, in claiming that a change occurred I claim that a certain construct, denoted by ‘that p ’, was and is no longer.

At this point Prior simply says that change is not about that further construct. It is about objects, such as Trump (and presumably the abstract object ‘election’). His evidence is that the statement such as (13-6) can be paraphrased into (13-5).

Well, this evidence appears to me most flimsy. In the first place, the paraphrase can go both way, so why to prefer just one direction of it?

In the second place, why does Prior isolates ‘that p ’? A more straightforward proposal would be that the change concerns ‘the case that p ’. After all, it is the case that p was, and now is not. The name-position is occupied by ‘the case that p ’.

And what is that ‘case’? To my ear, it sounds like a state of affairs, a situation. ‘A situation was, and is no longer’—saying so sounds natural.

If we are granted that much, then we can attack Prior further. The change does not concern just Trump, or Trump and election. It also concerns winning. Then again, it does not concern Trump, election, and winning *individually*. They do not recede into the past like three leaves randomly moved by a wind. They do so in combination. That is, what recedes is a certain relational entity, with the relation ‘ x wins y ’ and relata being Trump and the US election. And this confirms the previous suspicion that the subject of change, at least under Prior’s own analysis, is nothing but a state of affairs.

What, on the other hand, about change in events? Where did events go? It seems to me that McTaggart’s ‘events’ are nothing but states of affairs. Recall that events, according to McTaggart, cannot change, unless the change is temporal (within an A-series). That is also a characteristic of states of affairs. Every minute change in a state of affairs results in another state of affairs. Of course not every state of affairs is an event, but every event is a state of affairs. In particular, some states of affairs (mathematical ones, for instance) cannot be fitted into A-series.

Now, I do not wish to pre-judge the grand ontological debate. Perhaps all that there is is individual things. Perhaps relations are illusory, perhaps aren’t there either. But *this* is not Prior’s claim. And anyway, the evidence he brought does not show why one should believe in the change in things rather than in change in states of affairs.

THE DEAD QUEEN. Once Prior established, to his satisfaction, that change only concerns things, he asks how non-existent things can change in time. Does Queen Anne change from being dead for 200 years to being dead for 300 years? This seems strange, as we said, since only existing things undergo change.

Prior’s way out is to say that, for such presently non-existent individuals, we have to use the other part of the paraphrase. Thus we say:

It was the case that [for some specific X : $\phi(X, F, G, \dots)$]. (13-8)

This does not entail:

For some specific X : it was the case that $[\phi(X, F, G, \dots)]$. (13-9)

What is Prior’s argument for this? Merely this: that the locution ‘it was the case that’ functions exactly like the intensional locutions such as ‘think that’, ‘believe that’. In intensional contexts we are allowed no existential generalisation. Thus, similarly, there can be no existential generalisation of the kind exemplified in (13-9).

That the prefix shifting does not work in intensional contexts is not in doubt. But why to think that ‘it was case that’ functions the same way?

I think it is hard to defend Prior’s reasoning here. Because, first of all, there is no *obvious* incongruity in shifting the prefixes in ‘it was the case that’ and getting to (13-9). Secondly, even by Prior’s lights the analogy is incomplete: ‘it was the case that’ does *not* create an intensional context (it passes the substitution test, for example). Thirdly, again by Prior’s own lights, the shifting malfunctions only in the special case of presently non-existent individuals. But no general explanation is given why it should do so exactly in such a case.