A-facts and B-facts

J. M. E. McTaggart (1908):

Positions in time, as time appears to us *prima facie*, are distinguished in two ways. Each position is Earlier than some, and Later than some, of the other positions. And each position is either Past, Present, or Future. The distinctions of the former class are permanent, while those of the latter are not. If M is ever earlier than N, it is always earlier. But an event, which is now present, was future and will be past. […]

For the sake of brevity I shall speak of the series of positions running from the far past through the near past to the present, and then from the present to the near future and the far future, as the A series. The series of positions which runs from earlier to later I shall call the B series. […]

Varieties of A-theory

- Presentism: only the present is real
- Growing block: only the past and present are real
- Moving spotlight: past, present and future are all real, but the present is metaphysically privileged
- Shrinking block: only the present and future are real
Arguments for the A-theory

Zimmerman (2008):

My reason for believing the A-theory is utterly banal (some philosophers reading this essay will want to say “insipid”): it is simply part of commonsense that the past and future are less real than the present; that the difference between events and things that exist at present, and ones that do not, goes much deeper than the difference between events and things near where I am and ones that are spatially far away—in Australia, for example.

Prior (1959):

One says, e.g. “Thank goodness that’s over!”, and not only is this, when said, quite clear without any date appended, but it says something which it is impossible that any use of a tenseless copula with a date should convey. It certainly doesn’t mean the same as, e.g. “Thank goodness the date of the conclusion of that thing is Friday, June 15, 1954”, even if it be said then. (Nor, for that matter, does it mean “Thank goodness the conclusion of that thing is contemporaneous with this utterance”. Why should anyone thank goodness for that?)

Skow (2009):

Of all the experiences I will ever have, some of them are special. Those are the ones that I am having NOW. All those others are ghostly and insubstantial. But which experiences have this special feature keeps changing. The moving spotlight theory explains this feature of experience: the vivid experiences are the ones the spotlight shines upon. As the spotlight moves, there are changes in which experiences are vivid.

Deasy (2014):

The simplest argument for the A-theory is the ‘no change’ argument, and the simplest version of the no change argument is as follows:

1. The B-theory is true ⊨ there is no change over time
2. There is change over time
3. The B-theory is false (from (1) and (2))
4. The A-theory is true (from the definitions of ‘A-theory’ and ‘B-theory’)
**A-theory and relativity**

Einstein (1955):

Now he has departed from this strange world a little ahead of me. That means nothing. People like us, who believe in physics, know that the distinction between past, present, and future is only a stubbornly persistent illusion.

Brading (2014):

Here is a proposal for how to develop a version of presentism within the law-constitutive approach: identify the “present” of any given unity with the spatiotemporal region that is dynamically necessary to sustain it.

Zimmerman (2008):

This objector is saying, in essence, “If fundamental physics can’t see a distinction between two classes of things, there is no distinction to be made.” But we all believe in lots of distinctions physics “can’t see.” Arguably, fundamental physics does not require the existence of composite objects; all it needs to describe the events with which it concerns itself are things like tiny particles, gigantic fields, and space-time. Is there no difference, then, between groups of particles that make up larger wholes, and groups that do not? Should we conclude that, since physics does not mention things like dogs, there is no reason to believe in such things—as opposed to mere swarms of particles arranged in various canine shapes?

Deasy (2014):

[…] if a philosophical theory disagrees with or otherwise modifies a theory of physics, we should subject its reasons for doing so to the closest scrutiny. However, philosophical modesty does not require that we reject any theory that adds something to a theory of physics; we should not think that philosophy can never tell us something about fundamental reality which physics does not. It is perfectly possible to be philosophically modest and deferential to physics while at the same time holding that it is impossible to account for time and change without positing absolute presentness.
Deflationism

Deng (forthcoming):

Why not say that time’s passing consists in there being a succession of times? The stock reply was to agree to the re-labeling, but insist that that kind of passage is anemic, not robust. The reply re-iterates a presupposition of the debate, namely that there are theories of time that better capture its dynam-icity than others.

But the tenseless passage move [i.e. the claim that time’s passing consists in there being a succession of times] can be motivated by a deflationary view of the debate that rejects this presupposition. On that view, there is less at stake in the debate than meets the eye, because the idea of ‘robust passage’ is mis-guided. There are no robust theories of time’s passing.

Norton (2014):

If there are no observable consequences, then there can be no brake from experience for a runaway imagination. When we have a proposition with this unfortunate feature, we ought to take a second look and ask if the proposition indicates something real. Or is it a fictional invention in some fevered philosopher’s dreams? Perhaps we are dealing with a pseudo-question, an artful use of language that appears to pose some deep problem but is really only disorienting us in a labyrinth of our own invention.

These debates over the reality of various combinations of past, present and future show all indications of being debates over pseudo-questions. The problem is especially serious. The differences debated escape not just discrimination by observation, but by any factual difference accessible to science.