The Real Distinction Between Perdurance and Endurance

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Abstract

Theories of persistence fall into two general categories. Perdurance theories hold that an object persists in virtue of having temporal parts, and that no one temporal part of an object is present at more than one time. Endurance theories hold that an object persists in virtue of being wholly present at more than one time. The debate then, seems to center on whether or not persisting objects are wholly present at more than one time.

But what is it for an object to be wholly present? Persistence theorists on both sides of the debate have claimed to not understand what exactly this feature of objects is. Ned Markosian says of ‘wholly present’, “This expression is crucial to [three-dimensionalism], but many find it somewhat mysterious.” Indeed there is something peculiar about the notion, but almost all of the literature on persistence makes use of the notion of an object being wholly present.

In what follows, I want to look at three proposed definitions of ‘wholly present’, offered by Trenton Merricks, Ted Sider, and Ned Markosian, respectively. I will argue that all three are unsatisfactory because they fail in distinguishing perdurance from endurance, commit us to controversial doctrines, or fail in being informative. I will then propose a fourth definition of ‘wholly present’, one which I think adequately distinguishes between perdurance and endurance, and which is informative. This proposal will ultimately rely on a distinction between ‘existing’ and ‘existing at a time’.

Theories of persistence fall into two general categories. Perdurance theories hold that an object persists in virtue of having temporal parts, and that no one temporal part of an object is present at more than one time. Endurance theories hold that an object persists in virtue of being wholly present at more than one time.¹ The debate then, seems to center on whether or not persisting objects are wholly present at more than one time.

But what is it for an object to be wholly present? Persistence theorists on both sides of the debate have claimed to not understand what exactly this feature of objects is. E.J. Lowe expresses concern about this notion: “I can find no useful application for the notion of such a thing being ‘wholly present’ at a time, any more than I can for that of its being ‘partially non-present’ (in the sense, of course, of having earlier or later

¹ Notice that within these general groups the persistence theorist is left with the task of explaining how it is that an object has temporal parts or how it is that an object is wholly present at more than one time. This results in the standard internecine debates. But, one can stake out a position in the more general debate without necessarily entering into the in-house debates about which particular perdurance or endurance theory is correct.
In discussing the notion of ‘wholly present’ Ted Sider says, “This is an unfortunate way to formulate three-dimensionalism. What is it for an object x to be ‘wholly present’ at time t?” He goes on to say, “A three-dimensionalist might give up on the attempt to give a mereological account of an object’s being wholly present and understand the notion in some other way. One wonders whether ‘wholly present’ would then be an apt term.” Ned Markosian says of ‘wholly present’, “This expression is crucial to [three-dimensionalism], but many find it somewhat mysterious.” Indeed there is something peculiar about the notion. None the less, almost all of the literature on persistence makes use of the notion of an object being wholly present, either by denying that objects are ever wholly present (perdurance) or affirming that they are (endurance).

This leaves us in an uncomfortable situation. Either we must give a perspicuous definition of ‘wholly present’, or we must deny that the debate between perdurance theories and endurance theories turns on this notion. To complicate matters, there is some pressure, particularly from Trenton Merricks, to give more than a negative definition, such as ‘not consisting of temporal parts’. That is to say, there is some contention over what would count as a perspicuous definition of ‘wholly present’. Furthermore, Merricks insists that ‘wholly present’ cannot be defined without recourse to presentism. He says, “I think that there is no way at all to make sense of an object’s ‘being wholly present at every time at which it exists’ without

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4 Sider, p. 213.
not having temporal parts may be a necessary feature of enduring objects, but it hardly seems sufficient. For it is possible that there be objects which don’t have any parts at all, but which certainly do not strike us as enduring objects. We can imagine there being momentary micro-particles which by definition do not persist, and hence cannot be enduring objects, whether or not they have parts. We might very well desire a more informative definition, and as metaphysicians, it would not be odd to insist upon it.

In light of these considerations, Merricks offers what he takes to be an informative definition of ‘wholly present’. For Merricks, an object \( O \) is wholly present iff all of \( O \)’s parts exist. According to him, this notion serves to distinguish perduring and enduring objects, for if \( O \) is a perduring object that exists now and existed at some time in the past, then \( O \) has a past temporal part which does not exist now. On the other hand, since enduring objects don’t have temporal parts, it is not the case that if \( O \) is an enduring object then \( O \) has some temporal part which does not exist now. If \( O \) is an enduring object and \( O \) exists now, then all of \( O \)’s parts exist now.

Merricks’ only concern with this definition has to do with the possible commitment to mereological essentialism. Mereological essentialism is the doctrine that whatever is a part of \( O \) at any time at which \( O \) exists is a part of \( O \) at every time at which \( O \) exists. Informally, the theory tells us that objects have all of their parts essentially. We certainly want to avoid a commitment to mereological essentialism, and at first glance, Merricks’ definition of ‘wholly present’ might seem to commit us to this pernicious theory. In defending his definition of ‘wholly present’ against such commitments, Merricks relies on two assumptions: that \( O \) can have \( P \) as a part at \( T \) without having \( P \) as a part, and that a particular theory of time is true, namely, presentism. With regard to the first assumption, he says:

It does not follow from the fact that, necessarily, \( O \) exists iff \( O \)’s parts exist, that \( O \) has all of its parts necessarily. That is, it does not follow from ‘in every world, \( O \) exists iff \( O \)’s parts’ that ‘in every world, \( O \) exist iff \( O \)’s parts in every world exist’. Likewise, it does not follow from ‘at every time, \( O \) exist iff \( O \)’s parts exist’ that ‘at every time, \( O \) exists iff its parts at every time exist.’

Here I think Merricks nicely exploits a point about modal scope. With this point understood I think it becomes clear that his definition of ‘wholly present’ does not commit us to mereological essentialism.

But in order to avoid this commitment, and at the same time have ‘wholly present’ as the distinguishing feature between perduring and enduring objects, Merricks finds himself committed to presentism. Presentism holds that the only objects that exist are presently existing objects. This commitment can be brought out by considering the following quotation: “A perduring object is not wholly present at each time at which it exists. Assume \( O \) is a four-dimensional object that existed in the past, and exists now. \( O \) has a past temporal part \( P \) that does not exist now.” This is true only if presentism is true, for if there are objects which exist which do not presently exist, then it would seem that indeed \( P \) would exist. Here Merricks makes no mention of presentism, but I think the assumption is clear. Indeed, in a later paper Merricks explicitly argues that endurantists are committed to presentism.

But commitment to presentism is an undesirable consequence of Merricks’ definition of wholly present. An alternative definition of ‘wholly present’ which does not bring

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9 See Merricks (1999).
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with it a commitment to presentism would be a more plausible definition. In his paper “Four-Dimensionalism” Ted Sider also tries to explicate the doctrine of three-dimensionalism, or endurance, in terms of objects being wholly present. He looks at a number of different definitions for three-dimensionalism, and subsequently, a number of different definitions for ‘wholly present’.

The best of Sider’s alternative definitions is as follows: X is \textit{wholly present} at t iff everything that is at any time part of x exists and is part of x at t. Endurance, then, will hold that necessarily, for every x and every time t at which x exists, everything that is a part of x at some time or other exists and is part of x at t. While, arguably, avoiding a commitment to presentism, this definition clearly entails mereological essentialism, the idea that it is impossible for objects to gain and lose parts. Certainly this too is an undesirable consequence, indeed, more undesirable than a commitment to presentism. For, while presentism is certainly controversial, mereological essentialism is clearly false. Sider’s definition of ‘wholly present’ is just not going to help. He himself admits this, and can find no satisfactory account of ‘wholly present’, and hence, of three-dimensionalism.\footnote{See Sider, 210 - 213.}

Ned Markosian offers a third definition of ‘wholly present’. He defines ‘wholly present’ in terms of temporal parts, and he borrows a definition of ‘temporal part’ from Ted Sider: x is a \textit{temporal part} of y at t iff (i) x exists at t; (ii) x is a part of y at t; and (iii) x overlaps at t everything that is a part of y at t. ‘Wholly present’ can then be defined as follows: x is \textit{wholly present} at t iff (i) x is present at t and (ii) it’s not the case that there is a y such that y is a temporal part of x at some time other than t. This definition will certainly serve to distinguish perdurance for endurance, for it will be analytic that no perduring objects are wholly present. Markosian says:

If we adopt this definition for the purposes of understanding [three-dimensionalism], the formulation of the 3D view recommended above, then we will be construing the 3D view as saying that object that is present at different times does not achieve that distinction by having different temporal parts at the different times at which it is present. The 3D view will thus be the explicit denial of the principal claim of its natural rival, the 4D view.\footnote{Markosian, 247.}

While this is a very clear elucidation of the perdurance/endurance controversy, it also makes clear the major problem with this definition of ‘wholly present’. The problem is, of course, that Markosian gives only a negative definition, one which ultimately tells us nothing more about what it is to be wholly present than that it is persisting \textit{not} in virtue of having temporal parts. So, Markosian’s definition fails in being informative. We are still left wondering what it is to be wholly present. With the perdurance/endurance debate depending on this notion, it is seemingly imperative that we find a better definition of ‘wholly present’.

II. Two Variations On A Distinction Between ‘Exists’ and ‘Exists at T’

My task here is to give a perspicuous definition of ‘wholly present’ while avoiding the sorts of objections which were leveled against the above accounts. That is to say, I want to define ‘wholly present’ such that it is informative (not merely negative), adequately distinguishes between perdurance and endurance, and avoids commitments to mereological essentialism and presentism. We have seen that this is not an easy task, and yet, I think that such a definition \textit{can} be given if
we exploit a natural and widely accepted distinction between ‘existing’ and ‘existing at a time’.

Ironically, two important voices in the literature on persistence seem to jointly offer support for such a distinction, while neither avails himself of it for the purposes of defining ‘wholly present’. Both Ned Markosian and Dean Zimmerman argue against the claim that endurance entails presentism, and in doing so suggest, perhaps inadvertently, a way to define ‘wholly present’ which is at once informative and at the same time does not bring with it a commitment to presentism. I want to extract this distinction between ‘existing’ and ‘existing at a time’ from the work of Markosian and Zimmerman, while at the same time clarifying these notions. I then want to employ this distinction in order to define ‘wholly present’. It will turn out that there are at least two formulations of the distinction, and subsequently, my suggestion will be friendly to both tensed and tenseless theorists.

In trying to get clear on the presentism/non-presentism debate Markosian claims that it must be agreed that ‘x exists’ and ‘x is present’ are not synonymous. He says, “Once the two parties accept that ‘x exists’ and ‘x is present’ are not synonymous, they can agree that their dispute is over the question of whether these two expressions are always co-extensive.”

Markosian suggests that one way to make sense of this distinction is to understand it in terms of ‘x exists’ and ‘x exists at t’. In this sense ‘x exists at t’ is to be used such that Bill Clinton and George Bush exist now, while Richard Nixon does not exist now, but did exist in 1973. On the other hand ‘x exists’ should be used in such a way that anything that can be correctly placed in our broadest, most accurate ontology exists. Non-presentism would then be the doctrine which holds that there exist things which do not ‘exist now’, while presentism would hold that anything that exists is something that ‘exists now’. These construals are close to our ordinary intuitions about what these doctrines hold, and this gives some credibility to Markosian’s suggestion.

It turns out, however, that Markosian himself does not think such a scheme will work in formulating the debate between presentism and non-presentism. This is because when ‘x exists’ is temporally relativized, as he assumes the presentist is going to have to do, ‘x exists at t’ will then be equivocal between ‘x is included in our broadest, most accurate ontology’ and ‘x is present’. This seems correct, if one is a presentist. But fortunately, we are trying to give a non-presentist account of ‘wholly present’, and so we need not mind if we make use of a distinction which is unfriendly to the presentist.

In arguing against Markosian, Dean Zimmerman exploits this point. Ultimately Zimmerman agrees with Markosian that endurance does not entail presentism, but he disagrees on the proper formulation of the presentism/non-presentism debate. Zimmerman claims that no presentist could hold that there is a distinction between ‘exists’ and ‘exists at t’, where t is the present time. He says:

Presentists are among those who ‘take tense seriously’; they usually claim that, since tensed language cannot (or at least should not, for purposes of displaying ontological commitments) be paraphrased into a tenseless idiom, ‘x exists’ is trivially equivalent to ‘x exists at present’... There is no advantage for the presentist in distinguishing between being present and existing: and no other obvious candidate to play the role of ‘being present’ comes readily to mind. Thus to be present just is to be real or to exist, and the dispute with the non-presentist becomes a disagreement about how ‘x is present’ is to be analyzed.13

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12 Markosian, 245.

I agree with Zimmerman, although here I am not particularly interested in the proper formulation of the presentist/non-presentist debate. What I am interested in is the potential distinction between ‘x exists’ and ‘x exists at a time’. It seems that the presentist cannot accept such a distinction. But the question remains, can the non-presentist accept such a distinction? If so, can she put such a distinction to work in defining ‘wholly present’?

Zimmerman’s argument against Markosian implies that indeed the non-presentist can and should accept the distinction between ‘x exists’ and ‘x exists now’. He says: According to the non-presentist, something that existed in 1776 but not in 1996 still, in a deeper sense, exists. So she must spell out the difference between existing in or at t and existing simpliciter; and she must do this in some way (either the one I have suggested or some other way) which will allow for the compatibility of ‘Socrates does not exist at present’ and ‘Socrates exist’.14

Apart from its potential to defeat Markosian, which it may or may not have, this distinction between ‘existing’ and ‘existing at t’ is an important one. Accepting this distinction allows us to make sense of ordinary intuitions about non-present objects such as Socrates. The non-presentist wants to allow for singular propositions about Socrates, propositions that take Socrates as subject and attribute properties to him. But when the non-presentist says that Socrates exists, she certainly does not mean that Socrates exists in the very same way that Bill Clinton exists. What we want to say, although it is hard to find just the right words, is that Bill Clinton exists presently, while Socrates does not. This is the intuition that both Markosian and Zimmerman have, along with most other people, philosophers or not.

But what analysis can be given for the distinct concepts of ‘existing’ and ‘existing at t’? Whatever analysis we give, it should be such that ‘existing’ does not entail ‘existing at t’. Otherwise, we would be accepting presentism. We should also note that it might be held that either one or both of these concepts should be taken as primitive. In an endnote Markosian says, “Many philosophers would agree that ‘x exists’ ought to be taken as primitive, but it might be wondered how we are to understand ‘x is present’. My own view is that ‘x is present’, like ‘x exists’ should be taken as primitive.”15 While we might end up having to agree, it is worth attempting at least a partial analysis of ‘x exists at t’ or ‘x is present’.16

In my view, there are two general options. First, we can treat ‘exists’ tenselessly, and ‘exists at t’ in a tensed fashion. Alternatively, we can treat both concepts tenselessly, which would entail having to ‘de-tense’ ‘exists at t’. Treating both concepts in a tensed fashion does not seem to be an option, for understanding ‘exists’ in a tensed fashion would reduce that concept to ‘exists at t’, and hence disregards the distinction which we have accepted. I will look at the two options in turn.

If we treat both ‘exists’ and ‘exists at t’ tenselessly, then we must find some way to de-tense ‘exists at t’. This is the option that Zimmerman chooses, and he suggests that we treat ‘x exists at t’ as equivalent to ‘x exists (tenselessly) and is located at t’. Regarding this suggestion, he says, “To be present at a time or a moment is just to be located there - i.e., to be in that particular three-dimensional time-slice of the big four-

14 Zimmerman, 121.
15 Markosian, 248, n. 5.
16 ‘Exists at t’ and ‘exists presently’ should be treated in the same ways - the latter simply involves a specification of the time.
17 Michael Tooley makes a similar distinction between actuality and actuality as of a time, and takes these concepts as primitive. See Time, Tense, & Causation (Oxford: 1997), pp 33-42.
dimensional block that includes everything. It is not to have some special ontological status lacked by other things at other times.”\(^{18}\) This is certainly an option, although it does commit us to a certain ontology. Some might want to say ‘presentness’ is a certain sort of ontological status, a status that I enjoy and Socrates does not. We should try to remain neutral on these controversial issues. But perhaps we can leave this option as follows: we must de-tense ‘x exists at t’ either in Zimmerman’s four-dimensional way, or by claiming that presently existing things do have a special ontological status, or in some other way not yet specified. All of these seem to be at least tolerable options, and so we should leave this general strategy open.

But I find the other general strategy more appealing. This strategy involves treating ‘exists’ tenselessly and ‘exists at t’ in a tensed fashion. The primary advantage of this strategy is that we need not worry about de-tensing ‘exists at t’. As far as an analysis of the concepts goes, we can help ourselves to Markosian’s formulation, the one which he rejects as the proper formulation of the presentist/non-presentist debate. He takes ‘x exists’ to mean that x is in the domain of our most unrestricted quantifiers, and this is independent of whether or not x is present or not. ‘X exists at t’, or ‘x is present’, is then taken to mean simply that x exists now, in the sense that I exist now but Socrates does not. While this analysis of the distinction may not serve to properly formulate the presentist/non-presentist debate, we saw that Markosian is forced to reject it on presentist grounds. Since we are assuming non-presentism, we are free to accept such an analysis.

No doubt giving a really perspicuous analysis of these concepts is hard to do, and perhaps impossible. Markosian finds himself relying on the concept of subsistence in the absence of some other neutral term. While this term carries with it unfortunate associations (Meinong!), perhaps Markosian is right to think that we really are in need of some neutral term which will capture what it is to exist timelessly. I certainly do not know what it would be. At any rate, I think that by now we have at least a general sense of what the distinction between tenselessly existing and existing at t in a tensed fashion might be. We also have reason to think such a distinction is justified, at least if we are non-presentists, which we are here. If anything in the above analyses is correct, we can see that tenselessly existing does not entail existing presently. If it did, then we would be forced to say either that Socrates does not exist, or that he exists in just the same way I do. But we don’t want to (or have to) say either of these things. So tenselessly existing is distinct from, and does not entail, existing at a time.

III. Putting The Distinction To Work

It might be wondered, at this point, what the distinction between tenseless existence and existence at a time has to do with defining ‘wholly present’. The answer is that I now want to offer a definition of ‘wholly present’ which makes use of this distinction. My proposed definition is as follows: X is wholly present at t iff all of X’s parts are present at t. This might seem familiar, as it is very similar to Merricks’ definition, the one which commits us to presentism. But I have replaced ‘exists’ with ‘are present’ with the hope of avoiding such commitments. In order for this to work we should have available to us a distinction between ‘exists’ and ‘is present’, and this is just what we have. ‘Present’, then, as used in the right side of the definition, should be treated as follows: X is present at t iff ‘x exists (tensed) at t’ and t is present.\(^{19}\) Here, ‘x exists (tensed) at

\(^{18}\) Zimmerman, 118.

\(^{19}\) It might be noticed that in trying to define ‘present’ I use the very same word in the definition. But this is acceptable here because ‘present’ in the
t’ cannot be taken to mean ‘x tenselessly exists’ and t is present. The mere fact that x exists tenselessly and that t is present tells me nothing about what exists presently in a tensed fashion. Socrates exists tenselessly and we can assume that t is present, but it certainly does not follow that Socrates exists at t in a tensed fashion.

We can now see that this definition meets our three criteria. First, it is informative in so far as it is not merely a negative definition in terms of temporal parts. It is at least as informative as Merricks’ proposed definition, and it was Merricks who suggested informativeness as a criterion in the first place. This definition does seem to tell us something about the nature of a wholly present object. Second, it distinguishes between perduring objects and enduring objects. For enduring objects are such that they are wholly present at each time they exist, which, on this definition, means that all of their parts are present at each time they (the objects) exist. Perduring objects, on the other hand, will fail to ever be wholly present. At any given time, it will not be the case that all of a perduring object’s parts are present, because all of them except its present part will be non-present.

We are, of course, free to say that these non-present parts still exist. This brings us to the third criterion. Our definition does not commit us to presentism for the reason just stated. Past and future parts (if one wants to countenance such entities) will be said to exist tenselessly, and we know that tenseless existence does not entail tensed existence at a time. Furthermore, there is no reason to think that such a definition commits us to the pernicious doctrine of mereological essentialism. So, this definition seems to meet all three criteria. It does rely on a tricky distinction, but one which many people are willing to accept, and which some people think we must accept. What we have done, in essence, is take a commonly accepted distinction and put it to work.

It might be objected that this definition, in conjunction with my definition of ‘present’ implies that objects can only be wholly present at the present time. Indeed the definitions do imply this restriction. But there are two reasons why such a restriction is needed. The first is a pragmatic reason. Without this temporal restriction, the definitions would not distinguish between perduring and enduring objects. Our definition of ‘present’ would read: X is present at t iff ‘x exists (tensed) at t’. With t unspecified, it could be said that past temporal parts qualify as being present because they exist at t in a tensed fashion, where t is a past time. But if the past temporal parts of a perduring object can all be said to be present, then a perduring object will be wholly present. This clearly undermines my definitions. So, the temporal restriction must be a part of the definition of ‘present’ in order to properly distinguish between perduring and enduring objects.

But there is an independent philosophical reason for having this temporal restriction. No object can be wholly present at more than one time, at the same time. That is to say, enduring objects are not wholly present at more than one time simultaneously. For each moment they exist, at that moment, they are wholly present. So, it seems obvious that objects can only be wholly present at the present moment.

IV. Conclusion

The debate between perdurance and endurance is almost always characterized in terms of whether or not objects are wholly present at each time they exist. But there is a certain mystery concerning what it is for an object to be wholly present.
Three standard accounts of what ‘wholly present’ means fail. Merricks definition fails because it commits us to presentism. Sider’s definition fails because it commits us to mereological essentialism. Markosian’s definition fails because it is uninformative.

I argued that a non-presentist, informative definition of ‘wholly present’ can be given if we exploit the distinction between ‘existing’ and ‘existing at t’, where the former is taken tenselessly, and the latter in a tensed fashion. This distinction is justified because it is the best way to account for our everyday intuitions about non-present objects like Socrates. Without the distinction, we are forced to say that Socrates exists in exactly the same way that I do. But we don’t want to have to say this, because there is an important difference between Socrates and me, namely, that I am present and Socrates is not.

With this distinction in place we can then give a perspicuous definition of ‘wholly present’: X is wholly present at t iff all of X’s parts are present at t. If we understand ‘present’ here as meaning something other than tenselessly existing now, which we must, then we can see that such a definition distinguishes between perduring and enduring objects, while at the same time being informative, and without committing us to presentism or mereological essentialism. It seems, then, that a non-presentist definition of ‘wholly present’ can be given. Whether or not we should accept this definition as true is an independent question and one that is well worth asking.

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