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Specialness and Egalitarianism

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- Abstract -

There are two intuitions about time. The first is that there's something special about the present that objectively differentiates it from the past and the future. Call this intuition *Specialness*. The second is that the time at which we happen to live is just one among many other times, all of which would appear to be equally real if we could look at things from a God-like viewpoint. Call this other intuition *Egalitarianism*. Tradition has it that the so-called 'A-theories of time' fare well at addressing the first intuition, but rather badly when it comes to the second. My goal in this paper is to offer advice to A-theorists about how to reconcile their view with Egalitarianism. Different reconciliatory strategies are discussed- the most promising one involving the idea that propositions that are no longer true (or not true yet) can nonetheless feature in distinctive kinds of metaphysical or 'grounding' explanations.

1. Two Intuitions About Time

When they think about time, philosophers find themselves torn between two different intuitions. The first is that there's something special about the present, some unmistakable 'glow' that objectively differentiates it from the past and the future. Call this intuition *Specialness*. The second is that the present is just one among many other times, all of which are 'on a par' when it comes to their forming part of reality. Call this other intuition *Egalitarianism*.

A lot has been said and written about Specialness- partly, I suppose, because it is so difficult

not to feel its grip.¹ But it's not as though Egalitarianism is any less primitive or compelling. In fact, there are two natural routes (or, if you want, two mental exercises) suggesting that even the most die-hard fans of Specialness should take Egalitarianism very seriously.

The first is the route of comparison: compare the event of Caesar's crossing the Rubicon with any merely possible event, like the event of Napoleon winning at Waterloo. Neither event is happening in front of view right now. Yet, there's a fairly obvious sense in which, when it comes to how *real* they are, the first event, which occurred in the past, is *not* 'on a par' with the second, which never occurred. Now combine this observation with what looks like a plausible metaphysical assumption: reality does not come in degrees, it is an all-or-nothing matter.² The result is that the event of Caesar's crossing the Rubicon can't be just *more* real than the event of Napoleon winning at Waterloo: if it is to differ in how real it is from the event of Napoleon winning at Waterloo, it must be *just as real* as the event of your reading this sentence (which is no doubt real). Apply the same result to any past and future event and you will get Egalitarianism in its full glory: the past and the future are just as real as the present.

The second route to motivate the Egalitarian Intuition is the route of unity. Here the starting point is the idea that what occurred in the past, though no longer the case, is somehow *unified* with what is occurring in the present. Symmetrically, what is occurring in the present is somehow *unified* with what will happen in the future, even if what will happen in the future is not the case yet.³ Combine these ideas with what looks like a plausible metaphysical assumption: in no sense of 'unification' can the real be 'unified' with the unreal- there is and can be no communion between the real and the unreal. The result is that, if the present is real (as it surely is), so are the past and the

¹ Arguably, the idea that the present is special can be found already in Saint Augustin (*Confessions* XI; 17.22).

² The assumption has its critics. See, for instance, McDaniel (forthcoming).

³ The fact that there's causal commerce between the past, the present and the future may be one source of the idea. Another is the thought that, if the past, the present and the future were not intimately linked, each instant would not "flow" into the next instant, but would be like a world apart.

future. And this, once again, is what the Egalitarian Intuition amounts to.

Specialness and Egalitarianism seem to pull us in different directions: one invites us to regard the present as special, the other to take an egalitarian attitude towards times. But one should not be so quick to conclude that the two intuitions are incompatible. It seems perfectly possible to engage the mental exercises above and come to appreciate the pull of Egalitarianism, even while keeping Specialness in the back of one's mind all the time. To the extent that Specialness and Egalitarianism are compatible, it would be nice to find a theory of time capable of accommodating both. But is there any such theory?

2. Two Theories of Time

At least since McTaggart (1908), we know that the theories of time are, fundamentally, two. According to one theory, the world is dynamic: the basic questions about it- what is there? How are things?- do not (all) have permanent answers.⁴ Rather, what facts obtain and what propositions are true is something that changes as time passes: some facts obtain that did not and will not always obtain, some propositions are true that were not and will not always be true.⁵ Call this theory *Temporaryism*. According to the other theory, the world is not dynamic: the basic questions about it- what is there? How are things?- all have permanent answers. So what facts obtain and what propositions are true is not something that changes as time passes: a fact obtains if and only if it

⁴ I borrow this intuitive formulation from Sanson (manuscript).

⁵ In this context, the term 'fact' refers to things that obtain, absolutely and simpliciter. And the term 'propositions' refers to things that can be true or false, absolutely and simpliciter. These are no more than terminological choices. What is *not* a purely terminological point is that one needs the notion of a fact or proposition (in the sense just defined) to express the content of Temporaryism. For a discussion, see Sider (2011, 247-257). The point will become relevant in § 4.

always obtains, a proposition is true if and only if it is always true. Call this theory *Sempiternalism*.⁶

If there is a theory of time capable of accommodating both Specialness and Egalitarianism, it must be either a version of Temporaryism or a version of Sempiternalism. But it can't be Sempiternalism, for the combination of Sempiternalism and Specialness yields utterly implausible results (if a sempiternalist were to posit some feature of *this* time- the time at which I'm writing this line- that makes it special vis-à-vis all past and future times, she would then have to insist that this time has *always* been and will *always* be special, contrary to what seems natural). Temporaryism and Specialness, by contrast, are made for one another (temporaryists can concede that *this* time- the time at which I'm writing this line- is special, without committing themselves to the implausible claim that it has always been and will always be special). But there seems to be a good argument suggesting that Egalitarianism and Temporaryism are mutually incompatible:

- (i) According to Egalitarianism, all times are on a par.
- (ii) A theory does not respect Egalitarianism if there is some time or another that it discriminates against.
- (iii) A theory discriminates against a time *t* if, for some proposition *p*, the theory fails to affirm that *p* is true even if *p* is true at the time *t* in question.
- (iv) A theory on which some propositions that were true (or that will be true) are no longer (or not yet) true is a theory that fails to affirm the truth of those propositions even if there are times at which those propositions are true.
- (v) A theory that accepts Temporaryism discriminates against some time or another (by (iii), (iv) and the definition of Temporaryism)
- (vi) A theory that accepts Temporaryism does not respect Egalitarianism about times (by (ii) and (v)).

⁶ Temporaryism and Sempiternalism correspond to what McTaggart (unhelpfully) called the 'A-' and the 'B-theory' of time.

It is important to see that, if it goes through, the argument goes through no matter what kind of *ontology* the temporaryist adopts. Consider a version of Temporaryism according to which nothing ever comes into existence or goes out of existence: things exist sempiternally and only start or cease to have properties of various sorts.⁷ On one version of such a view, the event of Caesar's crossing the Rubicon never ceased to be something: it only receded into a region of being that is no longer 'illuminated' by the aura of specialness of the present. Similarly, the event of your reading the last word of this sentence exists already, but has not yet been 'illuminated'.⁸ Now, a view of this kind- whereby past, present and future events all form part of what there is- may seem more egalitarian than one on which past events don't exist anymore and future events do not exist yet. In reality, though, the inegalitarian consequences of Temporaryism have only been postponed. Ask a defender of this view whether the proposition *that the event of Caesar's crossing the Rubicon is illuminated* is true: her answer will be 'no'. Ask her whether, in some respectable sense of "time", there is a time at which that proposition is true: her answer will have to be 'yes' (after all, there's no doubt that proposition was true, at some point in the past). So, according to the view, the proposition *that the event of Caesar's crossing the Rubicon is illuminated* is not true, although, in some respectable sense of "time", there is a time at which it is true. So, by (iii), there is a time that the view discriminates against, at least in some respectable sense of "time".

If there is a way of reconciling Temporaryism with Egalitarianism, it is not by making ontology sempiternal, rather than temporary. But then is the reconciliation possible, after all? And if it is, how is it to be achieved? Let me begin by considering three strategies that, for different reasons, seem to me to miss the target- the *minimalist*, the *relativist* and the *fragmentalist* strategy.

⁷ The analogous view for modality says that, although things exist necessarily, it is a contingent matter what properties they possess. This is a version of what Williamson (2013) calls 'Necessitism'.

⁸ What does the aura of specialness of the present consist in? Several different answers are possible, the simplest one involving a sui generis dynamic property of presentness. For a discussion of other options, see Zimmerman (2011).

3. The Minimalist Strategy

The argument above rests on four premises. But (i) and (ii) are no more than different articulations of Egalitarianism, and (iv) seems unobjectionable.⁹ If there is a way of resisting the argument, it must be by rejecting (iii): the challenge, for a temporaryist, is to explain why failing to affirm the truth of a certain proposition need not be a way of discriminating against the time (or times) at which that proposition is true.

One thing the temporaryist can do is reject (iii) on the basis of:

(*) A theory only discriminates against a time *t* if, for some proposition *p*, the theory *always* fails to affirm that *p* even if *p* is true at the time *t* in question.

The intuitive idea behind (*) is very simple. According to Temporaryism, what is true is something that changes as time passes. This means that what a temporaryist theory says about the world *also* changes as time passes: for a temporaryist, the big book of the world says certain things today, but said different things yesterday and will say different things tomorrow. Now, a book whose content changes as time passes need not state, *once and for all*, everything that is, was or will ever be true: it will be egalitarian enough if, *sooner or later*, it gives every time the moment of fame it deserves.

This response succeeds in blocking the argument and is pleasingly 'minimalist', in the sense that it requires no fundamental revision of the basics of Temporaryism. Yet there is something unconvincing about it.

First of all, to the extent that it succeeds in the temporal case, one would expect the 'minimalist' strategy to have some bite in the modal case, too. In the modal case, however, the 'minimalist' narrative carries little conviction: on most accounts of what possible worlds are, the mere fact that every possible world *possibly* gets its moment of fame in the big book of the world

⁹ Notice, in particular, that it is perfectly compatible with (i), (ii) and (iv) to conceive of times as ersatz objects.

does not make all possible worlds equally real. Why should things work differently with times?

Second, and relatedly, (*) makes egalitarianism about times implausibly cheap, if not inescapable. This can be seen from the fact that many temporaryists model times as maximal scenarios *that are sometimes true*.¹⁰ So for many temporaryists it will be *of the definition* of a time that, sooner or later, it gets its moment of fame in the big book of the world. Given (*), this means that many temporaryists should regard egalitarianism about times as something of an analytic truth. But this seems wrong: while Egalitarianism may turn out to be compatible with Temporaryism, it certainly should not be made to follow from Temporaryism *by definition*.¹¹

4. The Relativist Strategy

A temporaryist could try reconcile her view with Egalitarianism by adopting some brand of Time Relativism. Time Relativism is the view that the truth of any proposition should be conceived of as relative to times.¹² For a time-relativist, premise (iii) in the argument above needs to be disambiguated. If “fails to affirm that p is true” is short for “fails to affirm that p is true *relative to some time or another*”, then (iii) is true, but innocuous (no time-relativist thinks that something is sometimes true without there being a time relative to which it is true). If, on the other hand, “fails to affirm that p is true” is short for “fails to affirm that p is true *simpliciter*”, then (iii) implies that Time Relativism discriminates against *all* times (for no time t, not even the present time, does Time

¹⁰ See, for example, Prior (1967).

¹¹ The point can be made even more general: given (*), egalitarianism about times will follow from the platitude that every time is sometimes present, whether or not times are reduced to maximal scenarios that are sometimes true.

¹² In the contemporary debate, Time Relativism is mostly treated as a thesis in semantics (see, for instance, MacFarlane (2003) and Brogaard (2012)). But it might be argued that, given a certain natural understanding of the relation between propositions and facts (for the proposition that p to be true just is for the fact that p to obtain), this thesis has distinctive metaphysical consequences. For a discussion of 'metaphysical' relativism, see Fine (2005).

Relativism affirms that what is true at t is true simpliciter). But discriminating against all times is discriminating against none. So, under this second reading, (iii) can be rejected and the argument blocked.

Now, while a proponent of Time Relativism may avail herself of the response I just sketched, it's not so clear that she can still call herself a temporaryist. True, a time-relativist can allow certain propositions (e.g. the proposition *that Caesar is crossing the Rubicon*) to be true 'at' some times and not others. But nowadays pretty much *everyone*, in the debate between temporaryists and sempiternalists, is willing to concede that much.¹³ The disagreement is only on whether some of the propositions that are true 'at' some times and not others are also *true*, period: the temporaryist says 'yes' and the sempiternalist says 'no'. If the relativist is on a par with sempiternalists in allowing some "propositions" to be true 'at' some times and not others, what distinguishes her from them? Maybe the fact that, instead of describing sempiternal truths as *true* (i.e. true, period), she describes them as 'true *at* all times'. But even supposing that there's a genuine difference here in the way the relativist and the sempiternalist conceive of truth, it hardly looks like a deep metaphysical difference.

(Should we conclude that sempiternalists do, after all, have a way of accommodating both Egalitarianism and Specialness, namely by embracing Time Relativism? Not really. If I am a time-relativist, I can truthfully affirm, at a given time t , the proposition *that t is special*. But, as soon as I enter the philosophy room and put on my time-relativist hat, I have to recognize that (a) the very truth of that seemingly unrelativized proposition is relative to t and (b) relative to any time t^* other than t , that proposition is false and the proposition affirming the specialness of t^* is true instead. In a sense, then, Time Relativism does not pay more than lip service to Specialness: it licenses talk of t being 'special', but doesn't treat t as special at all. This is just another indication of how little time-relativists and temporaryists have in common).

¹³ See Zimmerman's discussion of the 'new' B-theory of time (2005, 411-413).

5. The Fragmentalist Strategy

Another way in which a temporaryist could try to reconcile her view with Egalitarianism might be by endorsing Kit Fine's (2005) Fragmentalism. There are two ingredients to Fragmentalism. The first is a robust distinction between what is the case and what is really the case. Fine says that “whatever is really the case (belongs to metaphysical reality) may, with some plausibility, be taken to be the case (belong to [the world]). But the converse will not in general hold; and so [...] I might accept that I am sitting and even accept that it is a fact that I am sitting, but not accept that this fact is constitutive of how things really are” (Fine 2005, 267).¹⁴ The second ingredient is the idea that reality (the totality of what is really the case) is genuinely incoherent: for some propositions *p* and *q* incompatible with one another, it is really the case that *p* and it is really the case that *q* (although it need not be really the case that *p* and *q*).¹⁵ This leads to a radically new view, on which “it is taken to lie in the character of reality that certain apparently contradictory aspects of it cannot be explained away” (Fine 2005, 281).

Using Fine's distinction between what is the case and what is really the case, a temporaryist who endorses Fragmentalism can propose to reject (iii) on the basis of :

(**) A theory only discriminates against a time *t* if, for some proposition *p*, the theory fails to affirm that *it is really the case that p* even if, at the time *t* in question, *it is really the case that p*.

She can then make sure that no time is discriminated against by endorsing all the instances of the following schema:

¹⁴ Fine (2005) talks of 'mere reality' and 'metaphysical reality'.

¹⁵ Here and in what follows, I am sloppy about use and mention, preferring to avoid writing quotation-marks of any kind.

(Stability) If it ever was (or will be) really the case that ϕ , then it is really the case that ϕ .

Of course, what is really the case at one time need not be compatible with what is really the case at another time- which is why a principle like Stability has the distinctive consequence of making reality 'incoherent'.

Fragmentalism is a fascinating view, but I don't think it can form the basis of a successful reconciliation of Temporaryism with Egalitarianism. First of all, notice that Fine's notion of what is really the case is factive: whatever is really the case is the case. This means that incoherence is fated to spread from reality (the totality of what is really the case) to the world (the totality of what is the case): two propositions p and q incompatible with one another can both turn out to be true, if both of them are really the case. It is difficult to see how the fragmentalist can possibly avoid the spectre of true contradictions (the fragmentalist can, of course, insist that no true contradiction is *really* true, but this seems to me to be meagre consolation).¹⁶ Second, notice that, given Stability, the fragmentalist won't admit any change in what is really the case. Now, this would still be compatible with changes in the world (i.e. in what is the case), if the notion of what is really the case were not factive. But since it is factive, there's a genuine risk that stability, too, will spread from reality to the world, with the result that Fine's fragmentalism will start to look dangerously similar to a form of sempiternalism according to which the world is permanently contradictory.

6. The Grounding Strategy

¹⁶ Fine points out "although there is a sense in which the fragmentalist takes reality to be contradictory, [...] it will not be correct for me to assert both that I am sitting and that I am standing" (2005, 282). But it is not clear to me whether the point is supposed to concern *assertibility* rather than *truth*.

The minimalist, the relativist and the fragmentalist strategy do not seem to succeed in reconciling Temporaryism with the egalitarian intuition that all times are equally real. Where do we go from here? The strategy I want to explore in the remainder of this paper is inspired by two thoughts.

The first is that any egalitarian version of Temporaryism had better respect Stability, the principle that whatever was or will be really the case *is* really the case. This much fragmentalists were right about: unless reality is 'stable' (and, therefore, incoherent), no sense can be made of the idea that, when it comes to how real they are, the past and the future are perfectly 'on a par' with the present.

The second thought is that stability and incoherence will inevitably spread from reality (the totality of what is really the case) to the world (the totality of what is the case), unless we deny something that Fine's fragmentalist accepts, namely:

(Factivity) If it is really the case that p, then p.

Rejecting Factivity is certainly a controversial move, but one that the egalitarian temporaryist should not try to avoid.¹⁷ For if it is the reality *of the past* that one wants to rescue, one shouldn't be afraid of saying that certain things, though really the case, are not the case anymore: *the past is real and nonetheless irredeemably past*. Symmetrically, if it is the reality *of the future* that one wants to vindicate, one should admit that many things are really the case even if they are not the case yet: *the future is real and nevertheless irreducibly future*.

Of course, the strategy needs to be supplemented with a *pars construens*: after rejecting Factivity, the egalitarian temporaryist must provide us with some independent gloss on the notion of reality she has in mind, otherwise her acceptance of Stability will have the air of an unprincipled

¹⁷ Though they have a different take on Fine's fragmentalism, Rosenkranz and Correia (2011) come to a similar conclusion.

stipulation. What could the alternative and independent gloss be? Here one promising line starts with the idea when a certain proposition p *metaphysically explains*- or 'grounds'- another proposition q , there's a rather natural sense in which what p says is really the case, for it is by reference to it that we understand how things most fundamentally are with respect to q .¹⁸ This provides intuitive support to:

(Grounding) For every proposition p , it is really the case that p if and only if, for some proposition q , p grounds q .¹⁹

With Grounding in place, it's pretty clear what the egalitarian temporaryist needs to do: she needs to show that there are distinctively metaphysical or 'grounding' explanations featuring propositions that were really true (but are no longer true) and that will be really true (but are not true yet) as explanans.

How could this be? What propositions could possibly be grounded or metaphysically explained by *false* propositions (albeit ones that were or will be really true)? The answer is, I think, pretty obvious: presently true propositions about what *was* or *will be* really the case.²⁰ Take the proposition *that it was really the case that Caesar crossed the Rubicon*. While this proposition is no doubt true, there is a widespread feeling that truths of this sort stand in need of metaphysical explanation.²¹ And here's the kind of explanation that our egalitarian temporaryist will provide: *it*

¹⁸ The idea should be familiar. See Correia and Schnieder (2012).

¹⁹ My preferred understanding of the principle is in terms of ultimate grounds- if p grounds q , it is not itself grounded in anything else- but other conceptions of grounding are certainly compatible with it.

²⁰ Why not, more generally, propositions about what was or will be the case? Because some propositions about what was or will be the case are, intuitively, grounded in the present (e.g. the proposition *that yesterday it was the case that it would rain today*).

²¹ This is sometimes put by saying that the truths in question are 'hypothetical' rather than 'categorical'. The distinction is due to Sider (2001, 35-42).

was really the case that Caesar crossed the Rubicon because, at some point in the past, *Caesar is crossing the Rubicon*. Here a present truth about the past (the proposition *that it was really the case that Caesar crossed the Rubicon*) is explained in terms of a proposition that used to be true but is no longer such (the proposition *that Caesar is crossing the Rubicon*). In other terms, a (present) fact as to what was really the case is explained, not by appeal to some other (present) fact, but in terms of how things *were*.²² A similar explanatory strategy can, of course, be applied to the future, too (present facts as to what will be really the case can be explained by appeal to how things *will be*),²³ but it's also possible for the temporaryist to take a differential stand on the issue, vindicating the reality of the past but not the reality of the future, or vice versa.

The idea can be formalized using an idiom that, alongside the the familiar tense operators 'WILL(ϕ)' and 'WAS(ϕ)' (whose intuitive meaning is, respectively, 'It will be the case that ϕ ' and 'It was the case that ϕ '), contains an operator 'R(ϕ)' meaning 'It is really the case that ϕ ' and two sentential operators expressing 'grounding'- write them as ' (ϕ) *BECAUSE-IN-THE-PAST* (ψ)' and ' (ϕ) *BECAUSE-IN-THE-FUTURE* (ψ)'- such that statements of ground featuring such operators can be true even if the sentence that states the ground is no longer or not yet true. The general principles that the egalitarian temporaryist needs to endorse are:

- (1) For any proposition p , [WAS R(p) \rightarrow (WAS R(p)) *BECAUSE-IN-THE-PAST* (p)]
- (2) For any proposition p , [WILL R(p) \rightarrow (WILL R(p)) *BECAUSE-IN-THE-FUTURE* (p)]

Given Grounding, (1) and (2) entail, respectively:

- (3) For every proposition p , WAS R(p) \rightarrow R(p)
- (4) For every proposition p , WILL R (p) \rightarrow R (p)

²² Sanson and Caplan (2010) seem to me to propose something along these lines.

²³ This is, in effect, the strategy adopted by Rosenkranz's (2012) 'Ockhamist'.

And (3) and (4) yield:

(Stability) For every proposition q , $[\text{WILL } R(p) \vee \text{WAS } R(p)] \rightarrow R(p)$

which is what the egalitarian temporaryist wanted: whatever was or will be really the case *is* really the case.

Notice that (1) and (2) are substantive metaphysical principles: a temporaryist can accept both of them, one of them or neither. Tying the truth of these principles to Egalitarianism (as Grounding does) seems to me to be fully consonant with the two routes we used in § 1 to motivate Egalitarianism. It is consonant with the route of unity because, by generating special 'cross-temporal' grounding claims, (1) and (2) substantiate the idea that the past and the future are somehow *unified* with the present. And it is consonant with the route of comparison because (1) and (2) have no plausible modal analogues (in general, we don't explain the fact *that the vase could really break*, by appeal to the proposition, true only in some other possible world, *that the vase breaks*- there's no natural explanation of the actual in terms of the merely possible, at most the explanation goes the other way around).

Unlike the 'minimalist' strategy, the Grounding Strategy allows us to see the question of Egalitarianism as a substantive metaphysical question. Unlike Relativism, the combination of (1), (2) and Grounding is perfectly compatible with Temporaryism. And thanks to the rejection of Factivity, friends of Grounding can appeal to (**) to block the argument, while avoiding the consequences of Fragmentalism. Of course this is not to say that the Grounding Strategy has no costs. The idea that falsehoods can do essential explanatory work is certainly not new, but it should be conceded that there is something revisionary in applying it to the case of metaphysical or 'grounding' explanations.²⁴ The tentative moral of this paper is that this revisionariness might be the

²⁴ For example, it has been argued that mathematical statements do essential explanatory work despite being false (Leng 2010).

price we need to pay to reconcile Specialness and Egalitarianism.

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