Your Actual Eternalism, Without Metaphysics*

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1 Introduction

Is there a genuine disagreement between presentists and eternalists? The skeptic, in Sider’s terminology, is the person who argues that there is not. Sider suggests that the ’skeptic’s challenge is a special case of a more general challenge to ontology’, a challenge he describes as follows:

The core of ontology is disagreement over what there is, over whether there exist numbers, events, sets, physical objects, fusions, past and future objects, and so on. Skeptics say this disagreement is merely verbal since apparently disagreeing ontologists use ’exists’ in different ways. Each theorist is right given her own use of ’exists’; there is nothing to fight over. On one meaning for ’exist’, numbers ”exist”, on another they do not; fusions ”exist” under one meaning but not another, and so on.

No one of these meanings is ”better” than the rest; no one is a more genuine sort of existence than the rest. One might sensibly disagree over which is meant by ’exists’ in a given linguistic community, or over which would be most useful to mean for a given purpose. But the ontologists’ debate concerns neither meaning nor utility, and cannot survive this proliferation of meanings for ’exists’.

Sider cites a number of sources for the skeptical view just described, including Carnap’s classic paper, ’Empiricism, Semantics and Ontology’.

I have two concerns about this description of the skeptical position. First, I think that many people would want to maintain that there is a merely verbal dispute in this case, without committing themselves to Carnap’s radical metaphysical deflationism. In this case, the key thought is that the two sides in the apparent dispute talk past one another for a very specific reason, related to the grammar of tense in English: presentists employ ’exists’ in a tensed sense, eternalists in an untensed sense, and the grammar happens to facilitate

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such a confusion. Sort out the confusion, says the skeptic, and the conflict evaporates. Surely one might accept this irenic diagnosis, and yet be much more metaphysical than Carnap about the significance of ontological questions in general, in either the tensed or the untensed sense.¹

Accordingly, there seems to be a niche for an entirely non-Carnapian species of skepticism in this debate. It is a further question whether such a view is either defensible or genuinely irenic, of course. Concerning the latter, it might be argued that the diagnosis actually favours eternalism more than presentism, because it is less of a concession for the eternalist to recognise the legitimacy of a tensed, or embedded, vocabulary, than for the presentist to do the reverse. I am sympathetic to this thought, but I want to develop it on territory I find more congenial.

Now to my second concern about Sider’s Carnapian characterisation of skepticism about the presentist–eternalist debate. I’m a card-carrying Carnapian in matters metaphysical, but I’m not convinced that we Carnapians do need to be skeptics, or quietists, about debate between presentists and eternalists. We can’t regard it as an authentically metaphysical dispute, of course, because by our lights there are no such disputes, at least of the bad old kind. But that doesn’t mean it can’t be some other sort of dispute. Carnapians don’t say that anything goes, that any linguistic framework is as good as any other—only that any legitimate question of the form ‘What stays?’ is not a metaphysical question.

So I’m interested in Carnap-friendly grounds for preferring eternalism to presentism, or vice versa; and also in comparing this issue to the corresponding issue in the modal case. I’m going to sketch a case for three conclusions.

1. There’s actually more room for a real issue between presentism and eternalism—less of a case for skepticism—in Carnapian terms than in metaphysical terms. Even if the ‘merely a verbal dispute’ objection dissolves any purely ontological disagreement, it doesn’t touch the various pragmatic considerations that might favour (a Carnapian version of) eternalism over presentism, or vice versa—i.e., that might recommend the adoption of one linguistic framework rather than the other.

2. These considerations seem to favour eternalism.

3. The modal case turns out to be interestingly disanalogous—in that case, the pragmatic considerations seem to favour actualism. (So, as advertised, your actual eternalism, without metaphysics.)

Before I turn to these issues, however, I want to make some remarks intended to ‘situate’ the Carnapian position, as I take it to be.

¹Savitt as an example?
2 Against semantically-grounded metaphysics

Carnapians and their allies maintain that it often pays to think about the functions of language, when confronted with (seemingly) metaphysical difficulties. They are often criticised by more metaphysically-inclined opponents for paying too much attention to linguistic matters. Yet in the approach to metaphysics favoured by Sider, a substantial assumption about the functions of language enters at the very beginning—a kind of User Agreement on which would-be metaphysicians need to click ‘Accept’, before they can play this version of the metaphysical game.

What does the assumption say? Roughly, that in the relevant cases the right answer to the question ‘What are we doing with this bit of language?’ is ‘We’re referring’; where this carries considerable theoretical weight, because it is supposed to guide us to our metaphysical targets. The assumption enables us to redescribe our targets as the truthmakers of sentences, and the referents (or ‘reference magnets’) associated with our terms—and we then set out to investigate our subject-matter, described in this new way.

We Carnapians don’t know whether to laugh or cry about this kind of metaphysics. It is amusing to see our opponents ‘reduced’ to doing metaphysics by this linguistic route; but galling that in the process, they often seem blind to one of our own central doctrines about the relevance of language: viz., the view that this strongly referential conception of language may well be a theoretical mistake, in important cases (and a source of further philosophical mistakes, such as the urge to ask metaphysical questions).

True, it is easy to take this referential assumption for granted, because a sufficiently deflationary reading of the semantic notions involved can make it trivial (cf. Quine on semantic ascent). But these deflationist readings are no help to metaphysics, as we see by noting that they are compatible with non-metaphysical views, such as Carnap’s, or Wittgenstein’s, or Blackburn’s, or mine. (“‘Snow is white’ is made true by the fact that snow is white” = “Snow is white because snow is white”.)

In my view, this semantic assumption deserves a lot more attention. At the very least, a decent case needs to be made for it. To try to make such a case is to reopen the issue about the functions of language, of course. More seriously, it is to expose the program to various sorts of challenges:

1. Stephen Stich’s concerns, from Deconstructing the Mind, about making metaphysical questions hostage to a theory of reference which is nowhere in prospect (and if that’s bad for the metaphysics of belief and desire, the case that Stich is concerned with, how much worse for the past, or for existence itself!)

2. The attractions of deflationism, which, as noted above, would prohibit reference from playing this kind of theoretical role.

3. Concerns about circularity, if reference does play this role, when we address the metaphysics of reference itself.

However, I also have a more specific concern about the relevance of this project of grounding metaphysics on semantic foundations to the present issue. Sider is admirably explicit about the project’s theoretical cost, and concedes that while he is willing to pay the price, others might not be. I want to sound a note of caution about the project’s ability to deliver the goods, in the present case, even if the price is paid.

Sider’s suggestion is that some kind of existence might be such a powerful ‘reference magnet’ that it is capable of sucking in the referential beams from both the presentist’s and the eternalist’s uses of the term ‘exists’—despite the fact that the two sides take very different things to be true of ‘existence’. My concern is that a simple construction from naturally-jointed materials—the eternalist’s own notion of existence, and off-the-shelf indexical components—would automatically create a much better match for the presentist’s uses of the term, viz., ‘existence now’, where ‘existence’ is the eternalist notion. The stronger the former magnetism, the stronger the latter, apparently. Again, then, the tensed and untensed uses of ‘exists’ simply end up differently related to the same subject-matter—a subject-matter broadly describable in either terms—by different configurations of semantic forces, within the same semantic field. Again, in other words, an irenic conclusion (though of a radically non-Carnapian kind).

3 Which side of the fence was Quine on?

Quine’s shadow hangs over contemporary metaphysical debates, defining their shape and boundaries, and sheltering them from the hostile glare of Carnapian sons. But it is debatable whether Quine himself stood where his shadow now falls, or rather on the other side of the fence altogether. True, not much hangs on this issue for present purposes. But Quine is such an important figure to the self-conception of contemporary metaphysics, that it is worth a brief detour to call his role into question. In my view, the weight of his authority properly lies elsewhere, with a view much closer to Carnap’s.

According to the popular history, Quine was the saviour of robust metaphysics, slayer of positivist demons hell-bent on exsanguinating the entire subject. With one hand (the story goes) Quine wrote ‘On What There Is’, and thus gave metaphysics a life-saving transfusion; with the other, he drove a stake through the heart of ‘Empiricism, Semantics and Ontology’, and thus dispatched the last incarnation of the Viennese menace.

I’m exaggerating, of course, but not a great deal. Here’s Hilary Putnam’s description of the first of these achievements:
“How come,” you may wonder, “it is precisely in analytic philosophy – a kind of philosophy that, for many years, was hostile to the very word ‘ontology’ – that Ontology flourishes?”

If we ask when Ontology became a respectable subject for an analytic philosopher to pursue, the mystery disappears. It became respectable in 1948, when Quine published a famous paper titled ‘On What There Is’. It was Quine who single-handedly made Ontology a respectable subject.¹

I think that this view of philosophical history is mistaken in two ways. First, the metaphysics that Quine revived is itself a pale zombie, not the beefy, sanguine creature that positivists since Hume had been trying to destroy.⁴ Second, Quine’s stake missed the heart of Carnap’s metaphysics-destroying doctrine completely, merely lopping off some inessential appendages, and leaving the creature, if anything, stronger than before. The twin-chambered heart of Carnap’s view comprises, first, a deflationary view of metaphysics, with which Quine largely concurs; and second, a pluralism about the functions of existentially-quantified discourse, with which Quine does not concur, but against which he offers no particularly powerful argument.

In my view, the beefy misinterpretation of Quine is particularly well-embodied in the so-called Quine-Putnam Argument from Indispensability. This argument receives much attention in the philosophy of mathematics, where realists often appeal to it, and irrealists seek to evade it. Here’s a characterisation by Hartry Field (himself perhaps the leading contemporary writer on the irrealist side of these debates):

Putnam 1971⁵ is the locus classicus for the view that we need to regard mathematics as true because only by doing so can we explain the utility of mathematics in other areas: for instance, its utility in science … and in metalogic … . The general form of this Putnamian argument is as follows:

(i) We need to speak in terms of mathematical entities in doing science, metalogic, etc.;

(ii) If we need to speak in terms of a kind of entity for such important purposes, we have excellent reason for supposing that that kind of entity exists (or at least, that claims that on their face state the existence of such entities are true).⁶


³This needs qualification. In one sense, Quine actually revived the more beefy kind of metaphysics. Certainly it has been behaving as if it were very much alive. But I would prefer to say that it is actually as dead as Carnap left it, but that many of its practitioners—encouraged in part by the misinterpretation of Quine I am about to describe—simply haven’t noticed.


Here is Putnam’s own version of the argument, from the source cited by Field.

So far I have been developing an argument for realism along roughly the following lines: quantification over mathematical entities is indispensable for science, both formal and physical; therefore we should accept such quantification; but this commits us to accepting the existence of the mathematical entities in question. This type of argument stems, of course, from Quine, who has for years stressed both the indispensability of quantification over mathematical entities and the intellectual dishonesty of denying the existence of what one daily presupposes.7

I want to call particular attention to Putnam’s final remark here (his gloss of Quine). If quantification over mathematical entities is indispensable, it is ‘intellectually dishonest’ to deny the existence of such entities. The crucial point—a point missed by Putnam himself here, so far as I can see—is that a principled exclusion of arguments against the existence of entities of a certain kind does not in itself comprise an argument for the existence of such entities, of the kind supposedly captured by the above formulations.

In defence of the argument from indispensability, it might be said that Quine insists that if science reaches that stage of accepting (i) (in Field’s notation above), then there is no philosophical standpoint from which it makes sense to doubt that there are mathematical entities—to ask ‘But are there really mathematical entities?’ Doesn’t this imply that if science reaches the stage of accepting (i), then we are justified in affirming that there are mathematical entities? Surely we are justified in affirming what it makes no sense to doubt?

But we need to be careful here. Let’s grant that we are justified in repeating what science says. But this involves no inference from the fact that science says it: no argument, simply concurrence. The Quinean doctrine that if science reaches that stage of accepting (i), then there is no philosophical standpoint from which it makes sense to doubt that there are mathematical entities—to ask ‘But are there really mathematical entities?’ does put paid to a certain sort of ontological scepticism, or anti-realism. But it doesn’t imply that there is an argument from the needs of science to ontological conclusions—for realism. On the contrary, in my view, it deflates or disallows a certain sort of ontological debate: a debate taking place outside science, about whether there are things of the kind science quantifies over. After all, think of ‘really’ as a metaphysician’s term of art. The argument that it makes no sense to ask ‘But are there really mathematical entities?’ does not imply that we should say ‘There really are mathematical entities.’ Perhaps we should simply forget about ‘really’.

The difficulty here is that realist opponents will deny that they ever meant anything special (viz., ‘really’) by ‘really’. A familiar dispute then ensues about whose position is the more modest—about who holds the metaphysical low ground, so to speak. From the

deflationist’s point of view, the right strategy is to present one’s opponent with issues on which she must take a stand, one way or the other. The aim is to show that if she agrees, she is being more deflationist than she wants to be; while if she disagrees, she holds commitments sufficiently inflated to be targets. The claimed argument from indispensability provides one such choice point, in my view. However, if someone insists that she meant the argument only in the modest, anti–realist-dismissing sense, then we deflationists have no reason to argue with her any further. On the contrary, we should welcome her to the anti-metaphysical club—to that enlightened circle who agree with Carnap, in rejecting ‘both the thesis of the reality of the external world and the thesis of its irreality’.\(^8\)

In my view, Quine belongs in this circle. Like Carnap, he is an anti-metaphysician, or a metaphysical deflationist. Accordingly, his remarks in favour of eternalism—his affirmations of the existence of dodos but not unicorns, for example—should be read in the spirit of pragmatic recommendations: prescriptions from a position of claimed authority, about how we should agree to talk.

However, nothing in what follows depends on this interpretation of Quine. My main project is to argue that a Carnapian anti-metaphysician need not be an irenic skeptic about the debate between presentism and eternalism, or about that between actualism and possibilism; and, perhaps surprisingly, can hope to combine actualism and eternalism.

4 Pragmatism against presentism?

In §1 I noted that to maintain on Carnapian grounds that there isn’t a well-grounded *metaphysical* issue between presentism and eternalism, need not be to claim that there is no interesting issue between these positions. In principle, there might be a *pragmatic* debate, even if there isn’t a metaphysical debate. And it’s easy to see how the eternalist’s case might go. Eternalists will emphasise the simplicity and elegance of eternalism, and its ability to make sense of possibility of the presentist’s ‘embedded’ perspective. And they’ll stress a major advantage of permanence: a single subject matter, discussed by different speakers at different times (indeed, by the same speaker at different times), common participants in a temporally-extended conversation, with a temporally-extended subject-matter.

In one sense, presentists won’t like this image of the temporally-extended conversation. They want a contrast between the diachronic and the synchronic cases: multiple perspectives in a given conversation at a time, but no multiple perspectives over time. Still, they do want to be able to talk about how there were or will be people with different viewpoints. They want to make sense of common sense, on pain of a kind of temporal solipsism, which would have us ignore everything except the voice and concerns of our immediate and present contemporaries. Hence there’s a familiar dilemma for presentists: if they can say it, eternalism provides a more transparent way to say it; if they can’t say it, it’s a prob-

\(^8\)Carnap, ‘Empiricism, Semantics and Ontology.’
lem, from their own point of view. Absent some kind of metaphysical trump card, it is hard to see what could recommend a strictly presentist framework (and how could there be such a card, when the game is not even being played according to metaphysical rules?)

On the face of it, then, there’s an important asymmetry. Eternalists can happily make sense in their own terms of the presentists’ embedded viewpoint; but if presentists attempt the same move in reverse, they fall victim to the dilemma just noted: if they can make sense of the eternalist framework, the simplicity of the eternalists’ own formulation immediately recommends it; if they can’t make sense of it, that’s a problem. This illustrates what I meant earlier, by saying that the ‘irenic’ resolution actually favours eternalism more than presentism. Once we get away from the idea that the dispute is about existence, and focus on the virtues of one or another way of talking, there’s a prospect of a substantial reason for favouring the eternalist framework.

The conclusion seems to be that eternalism is ahead, on Carnapian grounds. But now there’s a dilemma. Don’t the same pragmatic arguments count in favour of possibilism, the modal analogue of eternalism? Can a Carnapian pragmatist find reasons to be an eternalist, which are not also reasons to be a possibilist? Could there be a Carnapian justification for what many of us find an intuitively appealing position, viz., actualist eternalism?

5 Pragmatism for actualism?

The question is whether, in whatever sense we accept eternalism, we should also accept Lewis’s possibilism. At first sight, it might seem that the issue isn’t as pressing for Carnapians as for metaphysicians. If accepting possibilism is just a matter of deciding on pragmatic grounds in favour of a framework that quantifies over worlds, why should it seem a problem if the case for eternalism leads to an analogous case for possibilism? So there’s not so much at stake, apparently, for a Carnapian like me.

However, this cuts both ways: if it’s a reason for being blasé about talking about worlds, isn’t it equally a reason for being blasé about talking about times—and doesn’t that devalue eternalism? For my part, I admitted to sharing the common intuition that other worlds are not in the same boat as other times, and I’m interested in whether such an intuition can be justified in Carnapian terms.

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9Note possibility of accepting second horn—there may be some debates of this kind where the eternalist is mistaken to think we need to be able to say it.

10As I noted earlier, Carnap never thought that anything goes; just that what stays rests on pragmatic considerations. And Quine agrees: ‘Carnap maintains that ontological questions . . . are questions not of fact but of choosing a convenient scheme or framework for science; and with this I agree only if the same be conceded for every scientific hypothesis.’ (Quine, 1966: 134)
5.1 How Carnapians might resist possibilism

5.1.1 A stronger pragmatic case for eternalism than for possibilism?

There seem to several reasons for thinking that the pragmatic case may be considerably stronger for the eternalist's framework of times than for the possibilist's framework of possible worlds:

1. It is arguable that times are considerably harder to do without than worlds, with a more central role both in science and in ordinary life. One way of making a case for this conclusion is the familiar one of arguing that talk of worlds is more easily paraphrased in other ways. (Cf. Quine's 'Three Grades of Modal Involvement'.) If it is objected that worlds play an indispensable role in philosophy, there's at least some prospect that some of their philosophical uses can be attributed to projects that pragmatists might disavow anyway, such as that of giving truth-conditions for modal claims.

2. There seems to be no actualist analogue of the presentists' problem of 'temporal solipsism'. There are some nice issues here, but we don't converse with, or care about the welfare of, our other-worldly counterparts—a fact which, in the latter case at least, ought to look a little mysterious, from Lewis's point of view. As a result, an actualist framework seems comparatively easy to adopt, in a sense in which a presentist framework is not.

3. It is arguable that in virtue of their role in physics, times are considerably less subjective than worlds—especially if an ontology of worlds can be shown to be language-dependent, or otherwise context-dependent, in a way in which times are not.

4. But most importantly, I think, there's a prospect of providing a genealogy of modal talk on actualist foundations, of a kind not simply not available in the temporal case. Roughly, in other words, we can hope to explain why creatures in the actual world speak of other possible worlds; but not why creatures at the present time speak as if there were other times (at least, we can't do this in a way that any presentist will regard as satisfactory). Thus there turns out to be an important asymmetry between actualism and presentism, when their respective projects are conceived in these pragmatic, genealogical terms. I'll develop this argument in the next section.

5.1.2 A perspectival asymmetry between possibilism and eternalism

Think of modal fictionalism, or modal quasi-realism. These views maintain that for more-or-less useful purposes, our ancestors came to talk 'as if' there were possible worlds, or

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*When we are sure that they are not us, at any rate.*
modal facts. Fully fleshed out, presumably, these views would offer us a genealogy for modal discourse. This genealogical story might itself employ modal vocabulary—for example, it might include claims about what would have happened to our ancestors if they hadn't come to talk this way. But this needn't be viciously circular. (Arguably, in my view, it is just like using English to talk about the genealogy of English.) And as the fictionalist and quasi-realist will note with approval, there's another sense in which modal facts or worlds don't play any explanatory role in this story—the whole point is to explain how creatures in a non-modal world usefully come to talk 'as if' there were further modal realms or facts.

Of course, the fictionalist and the quasi-realist both want to say that in some sense, this modal talk isn't to be taken literally. Roughly, they speak with the folk in affirming that there are ways things might have been, or whatever; but then they qualify this remark a bit, by saying it is to be taken fictionally, or quasi-realistically. In one of his last papers, Lewis notes the similarity between fictional and quasi-realism in this respect, and seems to suggests that both are therefore inferior to the view which accepts such statements without qualification; i.e., as Lewis regards it, to realism.

But what is this realism? Is it the view that simply says, 'There are ways things might have been', or the view that says 'There Really Are ways things might have been', with emphasis and capital letters? If there's a difference, then clearly it's the weaker position, for the stronger requires an additional qualification (though this time of a positive rather than a negative kind). And if there isn't a difference, then the deflationist wins by default, as I noted earlier. Either way, then, the position in question is effectively the Carnapian minimalist position. This view retains the positive part of fictionalism and quasi-realism, viz., the genealogy of modal language. But it rejects the fictionalist's and quasi-realist's further disclaimers on the grounds that they are illegitimately metaphysical (or, in the case of quasi-realism, illegitimately dependent on a distinction between genuinely referential and quasi-referential language). And it rejects any form of capital-R realism, for the same reason.

If this program goes through, we are left with a view that combines Carnapian tolerance of 'realistic' aspects of modal discourse—quantification over worlds, ascription of truth-values, or whatever—with a an explanation of how creatures in our (Humean) situation come to talk in these ways. The modal perspective comes to be seen as a 'projection' of the human standpoint; modal notions come to be seen as perspectival, or secondary (even if indispensable, even in science, and certainly to be left in place).

Now compare this to the temporal case. Is there any prospect of an analogous presentist genealogy for four-dimensional talk? The first thought might be that in the temporal case it goes exactly in reverse. The eternalist framework gives us a perspectival account of the presentist's viewpoint, as an embedded one (analogous to a viewpoint that exists...

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for spatial or personal case). Thus, apparently, there’s no problem with seeing the reason for the combination \textit{[actualism]} + \textit{[eternalism]} as being that we have ‘anthropocentric’ or perspectival accounts of the alternative in each case—of modal talk, and of tensed talk.

However, this is surely too fast, and dangerously close to question-begging. The issue isn’t whether it is possible to give a perspectival account of the embedded perspective, in the framework of the broader perspective—that’s true in the modal case as well, as shown by Lewis’s own treatment of ‘actual’ as an indexical term. The issue has to be deeper than that: viz., can we find \textit{objections} to a ‘projectionist’ treatment of times on presentist foundations, which are not equally objections to a projectionist treatment of modality on actualist foundations. In other words, what we want to be able to argue is not that eternalists \textit{can} give a perspectival account of presentist framework, but that presentists \textit{can’t} return the favour.

Can presentists offer us a perspectival genealogy of talk of other times? An initial concern might be that if such a genealogy is to evolutionary, it will have to refer to our ancestors, and hence to their times. Wouldn’t this introduce a circularity, or at the very least make the story importantly disanalogous to the modal case (where, as the fictionalist and quasi-realist reminded us, there is no corresponding need for worlds). But for sake of argument, let’s allow that this is no worse than use of modal notions that the actualist’s genealogy of modal discourse seems unable to avoid, such as counterfactuals about how our ancestors would have fared if they hadn’t hit on this linguistic strategy.

5.1.3 The disappearance of temporality

The main concern is different. It is that in the modal case, projectionist claims to give account not just of talk of worlds but of modal vocabulary construed in other ways—in other words, a general projectionist account of modal talk on non-modal foundations. The analogous thing in the temporal case would do the same not merely with talk of other times, but also with talk of the temporal properties of pastness and futurity: all talk of temporal properties becomes viewed as a projection of memories and expectation (or something like that).

The difficulty now seems to be that if temporality belongs entirely to the projected world, \textit{then any prospect of objective flux has dropped out of the picture}. Rather, we have been offered a psychological explanation of the \textit{impression} of temporality (including, presumably, temporal flux). However, that is what eternalists offered us all along! The big advantage of presentism is supposed to be that it gives us a more robust notion of flux, a notion according to which it is something other than a projection of ‘static’ psychology.

In other words, I am suggesting that the real problem with the actualist-presentist analogy is that if presentists set out to provide a temporal analogue of the actualists’ explanation of modal talk on non-modal foundations, they would be trying to explain all temporal talk in non-temporal terms—including, therefore, talk of flux, as they themselves construe it.
But this would be throwing the baby out with the bathwater, from their own point of view!

Thus if you do approach these issues in a metaphysical key, the hope of making objective sense of the apparent flow of time might tempt you to presentism. Whether such hopes could ever be fulfilled is another matter. I myself am doubtful. Why shouldn’t the presentist’s three-dimensional world be just as ‘frozen’ as the eternalist’s four-dimensional block, with no more flux in the former than in the latter? Why indeed shouldn’t presentism be as ‘static’ as actualism, with no more flux in the former than in the latter? But even if we grant the presentist an answer to these challenges, the advantage is lost if we try to make the temporal projective, on analogy with the modal case.

6 Conclusion

The following table provides a rather rough representation of this asymmetry between the modal and temporal cases. One respect in which it is rough, of course, is that it plays very fast and loose with the notions of primary and secondary properties. I don’t claim that these are in the end the most apt terms for the distinctions in question, or even that the distinction is of quite the same kind in the modal and temporal cases. Nevertheless, the table gives a sense of the territory on which actualist eternalism ought to make its stand, in my view.

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<th>Quantification over remote ‘places’</th>
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<td>Modal case</td>
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So it is not all that hard, from a pragmatic point of view, to make sense of a difference between the modal and temporal cases. If we think in a naturalistic spirit about what we’re doing with modal and temporal language, we’re likely to find a stark asymmetry between the two cases. I conclude that we eternalists have nothing to fear from the possibilist challenge . . . so long as we keep our heads, hang onto our naturalistic principles, and click ‘Decline’ when someone offers us metaphysics.