

Presentism and the pain of the past: A reply to Orilia

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Abstract: In a series of recent papers Francesco Orilia has presented an *argument for the moral desirability of presentism*. It goes, in brief, as follows: since the existence of painful events is morally undesirable, presentism, which denies that past painful events exist, is morally more desirable than non-presentism, which instead affirms that past painful events exist. An objection against this argument, which has already been taken into consideration by Orilia, is the *ugly history objection* or *radical objection*: what really matters in the moral appraisal of a world is the history of it, and since the presentist and the non-presentist versions of our world share the same ugly history, they are morally on a par. This paper aims at corroborating this objection and defending it from Orilia's criticisms. This will be done by bringing into play various thought experiments and a distinction between *relevance* (of an event or a fact about the occurrence of an event) *to the moral evaluation of a world* and *moral (and psychological) involvement* (in an event or in a fact about the occurrence of an event).

Keywords: emotions; ethics; ontology; presentism; time.

1. Introduction

One of the liveliest areas in the current metaphysics of time is constituted by temporal ontology, the inquiry into the ontic status – i.e., the condition of existence/nonexistence, or reality/unreality – of the past and the future. A major option in temporal ontology is presentism: the thesis that, unlike the present, neither the past nor the future tenselessly exists. In opposition to presentism stand incrementism, according to which, besides the present, there tenselessly exists the past but not the future, and eternalism, according to which there tenselessly exist, just like the present, both the past and the future: for convenience, we may group both incrementism and eternalism under the term *non-presentism*.¹ An argument has been recently put forth by Francesco Orilia to

¹ As is well known, there is a debate about whether temporal ontology is a substantial field of metaphysical research and, if it is, how the competing views in it should be formulated. I share the widespread opinions that temporal ontology is indeed substantial and that an adequate formulation

the effect that presentism is more desirable, or valuable, than non-presentism from a moral point of view (references in the next section). Orilia's basic idea is that if non-presentism is true, all the painful events of the past – from everyday annoyances, such as mosquito bites, up to the most horrific tragedies of human history, such as genocides – are tenselessly part of reality. This is not the case, however, if on the contrary presentism is true. So, under the plausible assumption that the lack of pain is morally more desirable than the presence of it, we should find more valuable the option that presentism is true and non-presentism false rather than vice versa. My contribution in this paper is aimed at refuting Orilia's argument by corroborating an objection that Orilia has already taken into consideration in his works, but – I think – not given a satisfying reply: the ugly history objection, or radical objection, according to which all that really matters in attempting an appraisal of the moral value of our world is its history, while the way this history is ontologically construed, i.e., whether presentistically or non-presentistically, is irrelevant.

This paper is structured as follows. In §2, I shall present the argument for the moral desirability of presentism and report some relevant considerations of moral psychology made by its author: they are a corollary to the argument itself and concern an alleged appropriateness for non-presentists to be morally burdened by, and sorrowful for, past suffering (much) *more* than presentists are. In §3, I shall expound the ugly history objection. In §4, I shall present the rejoinder offered by Orilia. In §5, I shall describe four thought experiments aimed at strengthening the ugly history objection. In §6, I shall show how the ugly history objection gives us a reason to think that, contrary to Orilia's opinion, it is *not* appropriate for non-presentists to be morally burdened by, and sorrowful for, past suffering more than presentists are. Moreover, I shall sketch a justification wholly independent from temporal ontology – i.e., one where the ontic status of the past or future does not play any role – for the fact that, generally, in everyday life we are morally (and psychologically) involved in – and thus burdened by and sorrowful for – present suffering more than past suffering. I shall also suggest an explanation for the eventuality that the non-presentist view that past painful events tenselessly exist might remain somewhat unsettling even to those who are convinced by the ugly history objection and the considerations in its support made in this paper. In §7, I shall conclude by briefly summarising the results of my contribution.

of the competing views in it requires the use of tenseless predication, i.e., a predication that fails to determine whether the attribute instantiation it expresses is past, present or future (or in time at all). For more information about the appeal to tenseless predication in accounting for the substantiality of temporal ontology, see Hestevold and Carter (2002), Ludlow (2004), Torrenco (2012), and Graziani and Orilia (2019).

2. *The argument for the moral desirability of presentism*

The line of reasoning pursued by Orilia emerges in embryonic form already in his introduction to the philosophy of time (2012: 112); in a subsequent paper (2016), it becomes a full-fledged argument; this argument is presented again, with some improvements, in two more papers (2018a; 2018b). In its latest version, the argument for the moral desirability of presentism is summarised as follows (2018a: 151; 2018b: 133, 134 – note that additions made between square brackets, here and in other quotes, are mine):

(P1) Absence of pain is morally more valuable than presence of pain.

(P2) If there were past painful events, then: (i) they are [tenselessly] part of reality, if the world is non-presentist; (ii) they are not, if the world is presentist [footnote omitted].

(P3) There were painful events, actually extremely dreadful ones, such as those involved [in] the Holocaust.

Hence,

(C) A presentist world is morally more valuable than a non-presentist world.

The argument is simple in its form and all of its premises appear to be true or highly plausible: (P1) is a “very basic axiological principle, which [...] most of us are inclined to take for granted” (2018a: 150); (P2) plainly follows from the very definitions of presentism and non-presentism; (P3) is an empirical claim that is very hard to doubt of.

Orilia emphasises that if the Holocaust is tenselessly part of reality, as non-presentists maintain, then “all the intolerable pain, grief and injustice that came with it are [tenselessly] concretely *experienced* somewhere in space-time” (2018b: 132). “If we seriously concentrate on that,” Orilia maintains, the belief that something as terrible as the Holocaust is tenselessly part of reality should involve for us a “great moral burden” and we should find the past sufferers involved in that terrific event as deserving “the same empathic sorrow reserved for the suffering around us in our current temporal location” (133). On the contrary, if our world is a presentist one, the Holocaust is tenselessly no part of it, and consequently “the empathic sorrow appropriate in a non-presentist world is not called for”: we shall certainly feel sorry that the Holocaust took place, “[b]ut thinking that the Holocaust is [tenselessly] part of reality, as in a non-presentist world, is a much deeper burden” (133). Now, the great moral burden and empathic sorrow for past suffering that Orilia deems appropriate in a non-presentist universe do not actually afflict non-presentists, and according to Orilia the explanation for this lies simply

in their “failure to seriously focus” on past sufferers (133, note 9).² (Similar remarks about moral psychology are made by Orilia also in 2018a: 151.)

Finally, Orilia also offers some prudent considerations about how the conclusion that presentism is morally desirable (more than non-presentism) might become a reason to embrace the opinion that presentism is *true* (2016: 251, 252; 2018a: 159, 160; 2018b: 144-146). Three relevant cases are mentioned: if one deems that the “theoretical” confrontation in temporal ontology, as it is at the current stage, is at a standstill; if one thinks that values possess ontological efficacy; and if one believes that there is an omnipotent and benevolent God – in each of these cases one might be encouraged by the above-expounded argument to embrace presentism.³ Although interesting and definitely worth further development and scrutiny, I set aside these considerations and go back to the very argument for the moral desirability of presentism, for it faces a strong, and possibly fatal, criticism – one that, I think, also yields a justification for non-presentists *not* to feel morally burdened by, and sorrowful for, past suffering more than presentists are.

3. *The ugly history objection*

The *ugly history objection* (as it is called in Orilia 2016) attacks the inquiry

² The emphasis placed by Orilia on the concrete experience of pain might also lead to a revision of the argument itself. Let us see how. According to certain non-presentist A-theoretical ontologies, such as Smith (2002)’s degree presentism (which, despite the name, is really a form of eternalism) and Forrest (2006)’s form of “zombie” incrementism, events that were painful (as they were present) are tenselessly part of reality but are tenselessly not painful. Now, as Orilia admits, these doctrines are under this respect “on the same boat with presentism” (2018a: 158; see also 2018b: 141). So, we might group them together with presentism under the label of *insentient past view*; analogously, we might designate B-theoretical eternalism, standard A-theoretical eternalism, and standard incrementism collectively as the *sentient past view*. And we might convert Orilia’s argument for the moral desirability of presentism into an argument for the moral desirability of the insentient past view as a whole, and that by replacing (P2) with the following: “(P2’) If there were past painful events, then: (i) they are tenselessly painful, if the world is a sentient past world; (ii) they are not, if the world is an insentient past world.” However, Orilia argues, these options according to which there tenselessly exist such pain-free painful events “almost seem to embrace *contradictiones ex vi terminorum*” (2018a: 158), thereby losing much of their appeal. Be as it may, for simplicity’s sake I shall put these options aside, leaving the interested reader the task of readapting the content of this contribution to them.

³ Orilia refers to Leslie (2013) as an instance of the second and the third case. As an instance of the third case, it is also appropriate to mention Mullins (2014: 126-132), in which an argument somewhat similar to Orilia’s one is put forth within the (Christian) theological debate on time. More specifically, Mullins argues that, unlike presentism, eternalism is at odds with the Christian doctrine of God as an evil defeater for, if the universe is eternalist, although God will be able to prevent the existence of evil and suffering from a certain point in time onwards, He could not remove those evils and sufferings that are embedded in the universe before that time and thus He could not renew the creation in its entirety (which in an eternalist framework would include the past, along with the present and future).

carried out by Orilia at its very basis, which is why it is also named (in 2018a and 2018b) the *radical objection*.⁴ It goes as follows. The argument for the moral desirability of presentism relies on a hidden assumption, i.e., that the moral value of a world depends *primarily* on what tenselessly exists in that world. Yet this assumption can be put into question, for it seems instead that the value of a world depends *uniquely on what existed and on what exists now* in that world, i.e., *on its history*, irrespective of whether this history is metaphysically construed in a presentist or non-presentist manner. As a consequence, there is no difference in moral value between the presentist version of our world, where a terrific event such as the Holocaust does tenselessly not exist, and the non-presentist version of it, where it does tenselessly exist: in both of them, the Holocaust *did exist*. Both of them share *the same morally ugly history*, i.e., the actual one, which unfortunately includes the Holocaust. So, the sought-after conclusion that presentism is morally more desirable than non-presentism does not follow.

4. *Orilia's rejoinder*

This objection strikes me as very convincing. However, it is not considered as a real threat by Orilia. Orilia acknowledges that the history of a world does have a weight in the moral evaluation of it. In fact, if we compare, for example, a world with the *actual* history – one, then, in which the Holocaust existed – and one with an history that is *less* ugly than the actual one – say, one in which the Holocaust never existed – we should undoubtedly deem the former world as far less valuable. But, according to Orilia, that history has a weight in the moral evaluation of a world does not implicate that the ontic status of the past has no weight at all. From a presentist point of view, he argues, the fact that certain painful events existed “cannot have the same relevance” (2018a: 157) in the evaluation of the world as the fact that certain other events exist right now. “For example, it is bad now and forever that an innocent victim was tortured in a concentration camp [...]. Yet, the reality of someone’s being tortured *now*, with the excruciating pain of the victim going on *now*, is *worse*” (157). On the contrary, Orilia goes on, “in a non-presentist perspective, this can hardly be claimed” (157). To show why it is so, Orilia brings into play an analogy between time and space that is often employed to give a vivid picture of the non-presentist understanding of the universe: just as – on our ordinary

⁴ This objection appears to me the strongest one among those addressed by Orilia and the only one that he has not given an effective reply; for these reasons, it will be the only one that I shall take into consideration.

picture of the world – an object that is here and an object that is somewhere else are equally real (they are just spatially distant from each other), so too – on the non-presentist picture of the world – an event that is in the present and an event that is “somewhen else,” i.e., in the past or in the future, are (tenselessly) equally real (they are just temporally distant from each other). But then “the past torture is [tenselessly] as bad as the present one, just as a torture is bad whether it takes place on the far away planet or on the nearby Moon” (157). It must therefore be granted – this last step is implicit in Orilia’s reasoning – that a painful event that tenselessly exists in the past of a non-presentist universe is *worse* than the fact that the very same event existed within a presentist universe. (The same rejoinder can also be found in Orilia 2018b: 140.)

Before proceeding, here is a brief explanatory note to integrate Orilia’s reasoning, which – I think – he would agree upon, and which will be presupposed by the considerations made in the remaining of this paper. On a very minimal reading, the locution “(the fact) that ...” may be taken to designate within a presentist framework a *present truth*, i.e., the being true of a chosen truth-bearer, e.g., a sentence or the propositions expressed by it, *in the present*. So, e.g., “(the fact) that an innocent victim was tortured in a concentration camp” may be understood as “the present truth of the proposition *an innocent victim was tortured in a concentration camp*.” This appears to fit well with Orilia’s reasoning and we may therefore say that Orilia’s view is that, in the moral evaluation of a world, the present truth about a past painful event weighs less than the corresponding event itself or, in other words, the present truth about a past painful event somehow “inherits” the negative moral value of that event, but only partially.

5. *Historically and metaphysically different worlds*

Although Orilia’s reply looks convincing at first glance, I think that it can be efficaciously resisted by bringing into play some thought experiments. One, which has already been taken into account and criticised by Orilia (2016: 237, 238; 2018a: 158, 159; 2018b: 141, 142), is the following.⁵ Instead of comparing two worlds that are different metaphysically – one is presentist, the other non-presentist – but not historically – they both have the same history, the actual one – or historically but not metaphysically, let us try to set a comparison between two worlds that are different *both metaphysically and historically*. In particular, let us consider a non-presentist world featuring the actual history and a presentist world with a counterfactually worsened history, i.e., whose history is different from the actual one and, more specifically, in a pejorative

⁵ I submitted this thought experiment to Orilia after reading a draft of his 2016 paper.

direction: let us suppose that the history of this presentist world diverges from the actual one in that much that the Second World War lasted longer so as to allow, let us imagine, the Nazi regime to bring to a fulfilment their plan of total extermination of the European Jews. Let us now focus on the fact that in the (historically actual) non-presentist world there tenselessly exists an immense additional amount of sufferance compared to the amount of sufferance that tenselessly exists in the (historically worsened) presentist world – namely, *all* the sufferance that is tenselessly ever felt by all sentient beings in the history of the universe excluding the present instant. Vice versa, in the (historically worsened) presentist world there existed “just a little bit more” sufferance – if we are allowed to say so – compared to the amount of sufferance that tenselessly exists in the (historically actual) non-presentist world – namely, the sufferance felt during the counterfactually prolonged Second World War and Holocaust. Let us now ask: which world is more valuable from a moral point of view? It seems that the non-presentist world is better, despite the fact that the amount of pain that tenselessly exists in it is far higher than the amount of pain that tenselessly exists in the presentist world. This shows that the moral evaluation of a world depends so much on its history that it is immaterial whether it is presentist or non-presentist.

Orilia is ready to grant that “[p]erhaps, the history of a world matters to a *very large* extent, an extent larger than we might have thought before this thought experiment” (2018a: 159). However, this thought experiment, according to Orilia, does not prove that the ontic status of the past has *absolutely no relevance* because, even if we grant that the non-presentist world pictured in it is morally superior to the historically worsened presentist world, “[i]t remains true that in a non-presentist world a past pain is tenselessly as real as a present sorrow in Andromeda and thus (P1), weak as it may be for other purposes, is strong enough to back up the claim that *our* presentist world is better than *our* non-presentist world” (159, emphasis added). (Orilia provides the same reply also in 2016: 238; and in 2018b: 142.)

Orilia’s assessment of the actual results of the previous thought experiment is correct. It is possible, however, to devise a new thought experiment, based on the previous one, capable of proving, through a finer comparison, the exclusive, or anyway preponderant, relevance of history – as follows. Instead of imagining an historically counterfactual presentist world with a past that is already modified in a certain way (e.g., by hypothesising, as done in the previous thought experiment, a Second World War and a Holocaust sufficiently prolonged for the Nazis to complete their genocidal undertakings), let us consider the *historically actual* presentist world, but let us ask ourselves *to what extent* we should counterfactually *worsen* the history of it before the histori-

cally actual non-presentist world turns out to be *as valuable as*, and then *more valuable than*, the presentist one. This question is legitimate, since *if* the ontic status of the past has some relevance, then there must be some “threshold of admissible historical uglification” of the historically actual presentist world such that it matches, or compensates for, the additional (i.e., past) amount of sufferance that tenselessly exists in the historically actual non-presentist world. Now, a precise determination of this threshold might be very hard, perhaps impossible, to implement in practice, as well as somewhat morally disturbing: it seems in fact morally disturbing to maintain that, e.g., a three-months longer Second World War and Holocaust might represent a suitable threshold of historical uglification of the historically actual presentist world beyond which the non-presentist actual world becomes preferable. Perhaps, however, you do not need to engage in such bizarre and disturbing calculations: if you share with me the intuition that *any* historically worsening, *as little as it might be*, of the (historically actual) presentist world would render it less valuable than the (historically actual) non-presentist world. And here is the point: if we are not willing to make any pejorative historical change in the presentist world, as little as it might be, then this unwillingness means that we believe that any sufferance, as little as it might be, when counterfactually added to the historically actual presentist world, makes it morally worse than the historically actual non-presentist world. But that is a good reason to think that a presentist world and a non-presentist world that have the same history have *exactly the same moral value*, and thus that the ontic status of the past is wholly irrelevant.

Although I am quite confident that all, or most, readers of this paper will indeed share this my intuition, let us consider the position of someone who does not and thus believes that there is some non-zero amount of uglification of the (historically actual) presentist world that may indeed compensate for all the additional pain that tenselessly exists in the (historically actual) non-presentist world. So, what amount of uglification might constitute an appropriate threshold – the breaking of someone’s big toe while hitting a table leg? the torture of a single innocent person? a three-months long mistreatment and killing of the Jews locked up in concentration camps? In answering this disturbing question, if at all possible, we should bear in mind that any *historical* worsening involves that some sentient being *suffers more often, longer or more intensely than it would otherwise*; and that, vice versa, in a non-presentist universe each sentient being does *not* suffer more often, longer or more intensely than it would in a presentist world featuring the same history. Now, I guess that the third instance of uglification mentioned already involves an amount of pain that exceeds the adequate threshold of admissible uglification even according to a convinced sympathiser of the argument for the moral preferability of

presentism. In other words, a presentist world in which thousands of human beings are imprisoned in concentration camps, mistreated, and killed until August 1945 is surely worse than an historically actual non-presentist world. However, it seems to me that this option – and *a fortiori* each of the other two – is still “too tenuous” to support the claim that the ontic status of the past has a *considerable* weight. Why? Albeit *terrific from the historical point of view*, the amount of pain involved in the counterfactual three-months prolongation of the Second World War and the Holocaust is still “very little” *in comparison* with the immense additional amount of pain that tenselessly exists in the (historically actual) non-presentist world; but if this comparatively “little” amount of pain involved in the historical uglification of the presentist world does indeed compensate for *all* the additional pain that tenselessly exists in the (historically actual) non-presentist world, then history must have, in comparison with the ontic status of the past, an *enormous* weight – and, inversely, the ontic status of the past must have, in comparison to history, a *very little* weight. And *if* this is the case (which I think is not, for I believe that the ontic status of the past has no weight at all), then the argument for the moral preferability of presentism loses a lot of its attraction and as a consequence, contrary to Orilia’s hopes, it will be incapable of really converting anyone to presentism.

It seems to me that the second thought experiment expounded manages to prove, in accordance with and in support of the ugly history objection, that the fact that a painful event existed in a presentist world weighs exactly (or almost) as much as the very event that tenselessly exists in a non-presentist world, and thus that the ontic status of the past has absolutely (or almost) no relevance to the moral evaluation of a world and the history of it is all (or almost all) that really matters. However, as convincing as it may be, this thought experiment (just like the first one) does not *directly* address Orilia’s reply to the ugly history objection: the thought experiment only tries to outdo Orilia’s reply in convincing power, without showing where the weak point of that reply lies. Moreover, it does so by appealing to comparisons *between worlds* (both historically and metaphysically different), while Orilia’s reply, as seen in §4, also features two *intra-world* comparisons: one, within a presentist world, between the relevance of the fact that a painful event existed and the relevance of a presently existing painful event (or the fact that a painful event exists now), and another, within a non-presentist world, between the relevance of a painful event that tenselessly exists in the past and the relevance of a painful event that exists now; and, admittedly, the claim that the ontic status of the past has no (or almost no) relevance appears indeed *harder* to accept in the case of these intra-world comparisons. So, although the second thought experiment is, I think, convincing enough to conclude that the ontic status of the past is irrelevant (or

almost so) and thus to confidently infer that there must be something wrong in Orilia's reply, someone inversely might be induced to doubt of the efficacy of that thought experiment and of the ugly history objection itself. To dispel these doubts, I shall now address Orilia's reply more directly and show that it fails to answer the ugly history objection. I shall do this by means of two further thought experiments that are analogous to the two previous ones.

Let us consider a presentist world and two painful events that are part of its history: one is past, and thus does tenselessly not exist, and the other is present, and thus does tenselessly exist. Let us suppose that the past painful event is an excruciating torture of an innocent in a concentration camp and the present one is a much less painful stubbing of a toe against a sofa. Let us now ask ourselves: what has a greater weight in the moral evaluation of that world – the fact that an excruciating torture of an innocent existed or the very stubbing of a toe that exists now? I think that virtually everyone will choose the first option: although the past torture does tenselessly not exist, the fact that it existed weighs *much more* than the presently existing stubbing of the toe.

However, following Orilia's reply to the first thought experiment, one might argue that the scenario just envisaged only shows that what happened, i.e., history, does indeed matter in the moral evaluation of the world, but still does not show that it is *all* that matters and the ontic status of the past is entirely irrelevant. Once again, however, we may modify the previous thought experiment to attain a finer comparison. Let us suppose that the two events in the presentist world are *equally painful* and ask ourselves *to what extent* the past event should be worsened (e.g., making it longer or increasing the intensity of the pain involved in it) in order for the fact that it existed may equal, and then surpass, in (negative) relevance the painful event that exists in the present. If the answer is that no worsening is needed, then this is, again, a good reason to conclude that the ontic status of the past is morally irrelevant: within a presentist world, the fact that a painful event existed weighs exactly as much as an equally painful event that presently exists.

At first glance, however, this result may appear more difficult to accept than the one of the previous thought experiment: the fact that an excruciating torture existed is of course more relevant than a presently existing stubbing of a toe; however, when comparing a present painful event with the fact that a *slightly more* painful event existed, the latter might still seem to weigh *less* than the former, and we might think – in accordance with the line of reasoning pursued by Orilia – that this is owed to the different ontic status of the past and the present in a presentist world. I think, however, that it might be the case that we are confused in this evaluation, for we probably tend to conflate *relevance to the moral evaluation of a world* and *moral (and psychological)*

involvement. Clearly, in our everyday life we are generally much more involved in presently existing painful events than in the fact that some painful event existed. But our being involved in a certain event or fact (about the occurrence of an event) more than in another event or fact (about the occurrence of an event) does not necessarily make the former more relevant than the latter in the moral evaluation of the world. After all, it is common experience that in certain circumstances some present events, albeit morally repugnant and having therefore an undeniable weight in the evaluation of the world, may involve us much less than other much less serious but equally present events. I think that by carefully distinguishing these two aspects, we should realise that a presently existing painful event and the fact that an equally painful event existed have exactly the same moral relevance, though the former might involve us much more than the latter. And I think that Orilia's replies to the ugly history objection and to the first thought experiment I have described above appear more convincing than they really are precisely because they take advantage of our tendency to mistakenly conflate relevance to the moral evaluation of a world and moral (and psychological) involvement.

6. *Moral involvement and residual discomfort*

As seen in §2, Orilia maintains that non-presentists should feel for past suffering the same moral burden and sorrow they feel for present suffering, because they admit that the past is tenselessly as real as the present; and that, if they fail to feel in this way (as it indeed appears to be the case), it is because they fail to really concentrate on what their ontological stance involves from a moral point of view. However, it may well be the case that the relative lack of burden and sorrow by non-presentists is owed simply to the fact that they share the intuition underlying the ugly history objection – namely that it is history, and not the metaphysical interpretation of it, what really matters to the moral appraisal of a world. And since the ugly history objection is correct, this observation represents not simply an explanation, but also a *justification*, for that relative lack of moral burden and sorrow by non-presentists: it is perfectly appropriate and rational for non-presentist *not* to be morally burdened by, and sorrowful for, past suffering *more* than presentists are, and vice versa, it would be inappropriate and irrational for presentists to be morally burdened by, and sorrowful for, past suffering *less* than non-presentists are.

Most people, presumably including philosophers engaged in temporal ontology, appear however to feel a much lesser moral burden and sorrow for past sufferings, especially long-gone ones, than for present sufferings. If the ugly history objection – as I have argued – stands, there must be some alternative explanation

for this relative lack of moral burden and sorrow, and possibly a justification too, for it seems at a first glance appropriate and in line with common sense.

Moral burden and sorrow for painful events both fall into the broader category of moral (and psychological) involvement in events or facts about the occurrence of events in general, which was mentioned in the previous section. Now, it seems to me that our level of involvement in an event or in a fact concerning the occurrence of an event fundamentally depends, as far as the *temporal* features of the world are concerned, on how temporally distant that event is from the present time or, in other terms (perhaps more adequate to a presentist view), on how much time has passed since that event occurred. Of course, our level of involvement will be influenced by other factors as well, such as individual differences in sensitivity, the spatial distance from us of the painful event at issue, the nature of the event – hence, the kind, the duration and the intensity of the pain it involves –, and the kind of knowledge we have of it, since, e.g., direct experience is undoubtedly capable of eliciting a stronger involvement than indirect knowledge. However, the temporal distance of the event at issue from the present time, or the amount of time that has passed since its occurrence, is what matters the most in the present context.

Up to this point we have a mere explanation of the relative lack of involvement in (facts about) past events. However, the lesser involvement is to a certain extent also *justified* because of our nature and the circumstances in which we usually act. If we were morally involved in the (facts about) past painful events as much as we are in present ones, we would presumably be overwhelmed by a psychologically unsustainable amount of sorrow, which would have an incapacitating effect. Moreover, since at each time we can only influence and bring about events that are *after* that time, it is just rational for us to be involved in events that exist presently or existed recently more than in events that existed a long time ago: the events of the present and the recent past are generally the most important events of which we have to take notice in order to act efficaciously. So, it would be *morally* useless and perhaps counterproductive being *too* involved in past painful events and especially long-gone ones (on the other hand, a *total* lack of involvement in past painful happenings would be of course morally unjustifiable and perhaps might be considered as indicative of a scarce moral sensitivity.)

Despite all that has been said in this paper, the non-presentist picture of the world might remain somewhat discomfoting to some. A possible explanation of this circumstance might be the following: even if we perfectly understand that what non-presentists claim is *not* that past painful events *still* exist – but only that they tenselessly exist (in the past) –, we have perhaps the tendency to mentally visualise past events in a non-presentist world as somehow *persist-*

ing into existence, as though something that happened, say, ten years ago were *still* into existence ten years later and *will exist forever*. So, when we think of the victims of the Nazis in the concentration camps and we think that their pains tenselessly exist perhaps we feel as though *those pains* are still into existence and there will never be an end to them. Whether or not this explanation works, I think that, to contrast this residual unsettling appearance of non-presentism, we should concentrate on the idea that the *experience of pain* in a non-presentist world is exactly the same as in a presentist world, assuming that they have the same history: each painful event is exactly of the same duration, kind, and intensity in both worlds.

7. *Summary*

The fact that a certain painful event existed in a presentist world is as relevant as the event itself that tenselessly exists in the past of a non-presentist world; and it is as relevant as an equally painful event that presently exists, in a presentist or non-presentist world. This has been argued for, I believe convincingly, by means of various thought experiments and the introduction of a distinction between relevance (of an event or fact about the occurrence of an event) to the moral evaluation of a world and moral (and psychological) involvement (in an event or fact about the occurrence of an event). It has also been shown that the fact that our moral (and psychological) involvement is greater for present painful events than for past ones can be explained, and indeed justified, without appealing to considerations concerning the ontic status of the past. If all this is correct, then the ugly history objection stands: given the minimal axiological principle expressed by (P1), what really matters to the moral evaluation of a world is its history, not the ontological interpretation of it. A presentist version of our world is therefore as desirable as a non-presentist version of it.

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