Hinchliff, Mark: A Defense of Presentism in a Relativistic Setting

Hinchliff thinks presentism is independently motivated, even though he doesn’t go into any detail about this in the present paper.

…the presentist is not committed to the tenses as irreducible properties. Sentences involving them can be paraphrased into relatively uncontroversial claims. For example, instead of saying ‘Clinton’s testimony is past’, we may say ‘Clinton has given his testimony’. In short, sentences involving the tenses can be paraphrased into tensed sentences. (page 577-578).

If we accept something like Sider’s ‘groundedness’ requirement for tensed truths, what help is there in providing this kind of paraphrase if one wants to avoid a commitment to tenses as irreducible properties? It is not clear to me what the crucial point Hinchliff is making (trying to make) is here?

**Cone model**

Only the present exists, and the present relative to a spatiotemporal point (or an event at that point) is, on this model, the surface of the past light-cone of the point (event).

Intuitively this might sound strange, but it appears more reasonable taking seriously that:

… in Minkowski spacetime where temporal intervals are not invariant features of the manifold, presentism should be understood not as a view about time, but as a view about spacetime. (page 582)

Since then:

…the present is not the events at temporal interval 0 from the time of utterance, but the events on the rearward cone at spatiotemporal interval 0 from the “spacetime” of utterance. (page 582)

Still, however, it is counterintuitive in that events classically believed to be past will be present on this stipulation of present (e.g. some supernova explosion). But notice that it is a stipulation of the ‘present’; something evidently has to give in the transition from classical to relativistic spacetime, and on this model it is the intuitive/everyday/classical understanding of ‘present’. See also Hinchliff’s reply to Savitt on page 581.

Furthermore, the model is counterintuitive in that whatever counts as present will be relative to a spatiotemporal point, a relativism that seems a troublesome commitment for the presentist; it seems worse, so to speak, than relativising existence to an absolute present in the classical setting.

Counterintuitive consequences seem hard to avoid, and Hinchliff thinks:

…it is a mistake to try to identify the “core” of presentism which must be preserved in a relativistic context. I think we should instead explore different proposals for fitting presentism in. (page 580)
Surface model

This view is more scientifically revisionary, it states that there actually is a privileged absolute present not accounted for by the theory of relativity. This seems to have been Prior’s view. The model ‘reverses the direction of fit’ between presentism and special relativity compared to the cone model, it:

… tries to accommodate the special theory or a theory with its empirical consequences into a presentist picture. (page 584)

One way of doing this is the “neo-Lorentzian” view suggested on page 585, this view will, according to Hinchliff:

…accommodate the same experimental results as the special theory, and it comes with a relation of absolute simultaneity. It is thus a way for us to fit the special theory – or a theory with the same experimental consequences – into a presentist setting. (page 585).