# Tense, *Tense* and TENSE

## By Graham Priest

IN his article 'Tense's Tenseless Truth Conditions' (Analysis 46.4, October 1986, pp. 167–72; subsequent page references are to this) Hugh Mellor replies to my objection to the argument of his book, *Real Time*, against the reality of tense. It is the purpose of this brief note to say why I think this reply fails.

Though I shall not attempt to make this note self-contained, let me set the background for the discussion. Mellor: observe that the truth conditions of all sentences (of a language such as English) can be given in a non-tensed metalanguage; tense is therefore not part of reality. Priest: the observation holds if and only if one assumes that truth is not tensed. If one assumes that truth is tensed the truth conditions of all sentences can be given in a tensed metalanguage. We therefore need an independent argument for the claim that truth is not tensed if the argument is to work.

In Mellor's reply I find essentially two rejoinders. Stating them requires some preliminary explanation. Mellor distinguishes between the grammatical tense of a verb form and pastness, presentness and futurity themselves. I, like he, will use upper cases for TENSE in the second sense, and italics for grammatical tense. Mellor points out, quite rightly, that TENSE and *tense* do not always align; that *tense* is, at best, a *prima facie* indicator of TENSE; and that in the debate about whether reality is tensed, it is TENSE that is important, not *tense*. According to Mellor, sentences, predicates etc. are TENSED in a derivative sense. A sentence (or more generally a truth bearer) is TENSED, if it 'explicitly or implicitly ascribes a TENSE to something' (p. 167); and a predicate is TENSED if 'it makes sentences containing it TENSED' (p. 168).

Mellor's first point is this: to give the truth conditions of non-*tensed* sentences in a *tensed* metalanguage, I used the verb form: *x eternally v's*, defined, stipulatively, as: *x has v'ed, x v's* or *x will v*. Mellor claims that eternal verbs are not, in fact, TENSED. Several points are relevant here. First, the verbs used in my definition are undoubtedly *tensed*. As Mellor observes, this does not automatically mean that they express (the relevant) TENSE, but in this case they obviously do so. Thus, eternal verbs are disjunctions of TENSED verbs; but whether they themselves are TENSED according to Mellor's definition is not so clear. The application of the definition is clear enough in the case of atomic predicates, but not in the case of molecular predicates. Do the predicates '*x* will not happen tomorrow' and '2 + 2 = 4 or *x* will happen tomorrow' 'explicitly or implicitly ascribe TENSE' to something? I don't know.

The only sensible way to settle the matter is to examine what the *point* of applying or withholding the epithet 'TENSED' is here. It is important to determine whether or not the sentences used in

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giving truth conditions are TENSED, since it is these which express possible facts. (On this Mellor and I agree.) Now what sorts of facts do compound sentences require? Facts just are whatever make true sentences true. And what is it in virtue of which compound sentences are true/false? As long as we stick to truth-functional compounds (which are all that are at issue here since eternal verbs are disjunctions of atomic verbs) the truth values of compound sentences are fixed once the truth values of their components are fixed. Thus compound sentences relate to the same facts as do their components. Compound sentences of TENSED sentences are therefore TENSED. In particular, then, eternal verbs are TENSED.

There is a possible, though perhaps baroque, defence here. This is to suppose that there are compound facts to which compound sentences relate; and moreover that these are not merely aggregates of the atomic facts of which they are composed (in whatever way compound facts are composed); but are independent enough to have emergent temporal properties (so that they are non-TENSED, though their parts are TENSED). This line of thought is not particularly appealing, employing as it does the reification characteristic of some of the more extreme forms of logical atomism; and I do not want to reheat these old chestnuts unless Mellor is inclined to do so.

There is another reason for not following this particular debate down labyrinthine paths. This is that the whole business is beside the point. Even if it were the case that eternal sentences express TENSELESS facts, it would remain the case that the metalanguage used in my construction refers to both TENSED and non-TENSED facts (TENSED facts being referred to by the truth conditions of *tensed* sentences). If this construction is right, therefore, TENSE is still an aspect of reality.

Conceivably an appeal could be made to Ockham's razor at this point: since the truth conditions in Mellor's original construction refer to only one kind of fact (non-TENSED ones), his approach is preferable. However, people who live in glass houses should not wield Ockham's razor. For a decent wielding would get rid of compound facts, if not reified facts altogether; and with them the charge that the *tensed* metalanguage is more complex since it appeals to two different kinds of fact.

It is therefore important for Mellor to have an independent case for the claim that truth is not TENSED (as I stressed in the conclusion of my original paper); and if this can be made, then my alternative construction can simply be ignored altogether. Such an argument is produced in the second part of Mellor's reply. To this I now turn.

Mellor's case that the truth predicate is not TENSED divides into two, depending on whether truth is predicated of sentence types or sentence tokens. Attribution of truth to sentence types is not TENSED since no sentence type has 'an A-series position, and

calling it true never ascribes one to it' (p. 169). But it is not only objects that have positions in the A-series. It is also states of affairs. And one obvious TENSED interpretation of the claim 'sentence (type) $a$ is true' is that the state of affairs specified by $a$ has a certain A-series position, viz., now. Thus, 'The sun shines' *is* true iff the sun's shining *is realized* now. Similarly, 'The sun *shone* on the last day of 1986' *is* true iff the sun's having shone on the last day of 1986 *is realized* now. Under this interpretation the truth predicate is clearly TENSED, according to Mellor's definition. (Note also that the second example shows that $a$ and '$a$ *is* true', need not have the same TENSE, *pace* Mellor p. 169.)

Mellor, I assume, would object to this interpretation. Under it, '$x$ is true' and '$x$ is now true' would mean the same — or at least, have the same truth conditions. And Mellor argues in another part of the paper that '$x$ is B' cannot mean '$x$ is now B' on the ground that this leads to the 'obvious vicious regress' (p. 168). Indeed the identity does lead to a regress. But it is not vicious; and it does not show that the two things have different meanings. Similarly, the claim that A and ~~A mean the same entails a regress, but this does not imply that A and ~~A have different meanings.

Essentially the same argument can be used to show that '$a$ is true' has a TENSED interpretation when $a$ is a sentence token. Here, however, Mellor has another argument. He points out that if truth is TENSED then sentences may change their truth value over time. This is not, presumably, objectionable when truth is ascribed to sentence types. It is easy to see how a type (or even a long lasting token) can change its truth value over time. What however, in the case where the token is short lived? I say 'It is 1986'. This is true (as I write). But tomorrow it (the numerically identical utterance) will be false. I made plain in my original article that this was a consequence of the supposition that truth is TENSED. But Mellor finds it 'absurd to say ... [for example] ... that John's death posthumously verifies every premature announcement of it' (p. 170). But this is not absurd at all. What makes such an announcement premature is that it *was* false when it was made (though it *would be* true). Nothing that happens changes that. The utterance is verified in the sense of being made true (now), not in the sense of somehow showing the utterer to have been right then.

Mellor appeals to what he claims to be an analogous situation with spatial indexicals. Someone in Perth utters 'I am 10,000 miles from Cambridge'. This utterance is true, a situation that is not changed by the person travelling to Moscow. (Though it seems to me that one could systematically understand things in this way.) But someone who accepts the reality of tense will not be moved by this and similar examples. For they will reject the analogy. After all, it has always seemed to people that *tenses* (temporal indexicals) describe properties of reality in a way that spatial indexicals do not. There is no argument about the reality of hereness and thereness,

for example. It is not, therefore, surprising that truth behaves with respect to time in a way different from that in which it behaves with respect to space. Thus this analogy just begs the question.

TENSED truth is (*is*) therefore not (yet) banished.

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# REPLY TO SPINKS ON TEMPORAL PARTS

## By HAROLD W. NOONAN

IN my article 'A Note on Temporal Parts' (ANALYSIS 45.3, June 1985) I argued that *if* enduring objects have temporal parts, it is reasonable to say that some of the temporal parts of an enduring object of sort *S* (i.e. those long-lasting enough to exhibit the appropriate properties) are themselves objects of sort *S*. If persons have temporal parts, it is reasonable to say that some of these are persons; if tables have temporal parts, it is reasonable to say that some of these are tables; and so on.

Graham Spinks ('Noonan on Temporal Parts', ANALYSIS 46.4, October 1986) objects to this that temporal parts of enduring objects of some sort *S* cannot themselves be of sort *S* since the coming into and passing out of existence of a temporal part of an object (not matter how long-lived) of sort *S* is not a sufficient condition of the coming into or passing out of existence of an object of sort *S*. For example, the coming into or passing out of existence of a temporal part of a table is not a sufficient condition of the coming into or passing out of existence of *a table*.

This was one of the objections I had in mind when I said in the penultimate paragraph of my note that if my suggestion was not to be easily refutable it must come as part of a package. The other item in the package I mentioned there was the denial of the reducibility of restricted (sortal) quantification to unrestricted quantification, e.g. the denial of the equivalence of 'some table is ...' and 'something is a table and is ...' It should be evident that if this equivalence is denied Spinks objection is blocked: that some temporal part of a table came into existence at *t* will merely entail the truth of 'something *which is a table* came into existence at *t*', but not the truth of '*some table* came into existence at *t*'.

Of course, the denial of this equivalence is controversial (I said a little about it in my note and I have also discussed it in 'Relative Identity: A Reconsideration', ANALYSIS 46.1, January 1986, and