

A NOTE ON CHISHOLM ON TENSE *

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Roderick Chisholm has claimed that the philosophical arguments that are designed to show that 'tense is illusory' are "very easy to refute, and ... not worthy of ... consideration"¹. In this note I would like to show that (1) given Chisholm's view on temporal relations in *The First Person* there is an argument against tense that is by no means easy to refute and that (2) if Chisholm modifies his analysis of temporal relations so as to avoid the objection to tense, then we will be better able to understand one motivation behind those who claim that tense (*not* time) is unreal.

According to Chisholm, if we take tense seriously then tensed sentences such as 'Socrates is now sitting' and 'The apple was green', express or refer to states of affairs that may obtain, *then* cease to obtain, *and then* obtain again. In addition to recurring tensed states of affairs, Chisholm's ontology of time includes temporal relations. Chisholm characterizes the relations *earlier* and *later* as follows:

For example, the past-tensed '*p* obtained later than *q* did' would be '*p* was such that it obtains, *q* does not obtain, and *q* did obtain'².

Is Chisholm's view of temporal relations expressed in this passage compatible with his tensed theory of time? I think not, and I shall attempt to explain why.

Given that tensed states of affairs may recur, it may be true that:

(A) 'Socrates is sitting obtained later than Socrates is sitting'.

But given Chisholm's views on temporal relations, (A) becomes:

(B) 'Socrates is sitting was such that: (i) it obtains, (ii) Socrates is sitting does not obtain, and (iii) Socrates is sitting did obtain'.

Since (i) and (ii) are incompatible, the state of affairs expressed by (B) is impossible and therefore (A) is impossible too. Consequently, given Chis-

holm's characterization of the relations of *earlier* and *later*, tensed states of affairs cannot recur, and tense is unreal.

The way out of this argument is to give a different analysis of temporal relations and in a recent letter Chisholm did just that. He said:

I had written in *The First Person* (p. 128): "For example, the past-tensed '*p* obtained later than *q* did' would be '*p* was such that it obtains, *q* does not obtain, and *q* did obtain'". I was thinking of *later* as being asymmetric and nonreflexive, so that nothing could be said to be later than itself. But if a state of affairs obtains, then ceases to obtain, and then obtains again, then, I suppose, it *does* obtain later than itself. (Since I arrived in the seminar room yesterday and also arrived there the day before yesterday, did I arrive there later than I arrived there? I suppose so. In any case, I arrived there *after* I arrived there.)

What if we analyze '*p* obtained later than *q* did' this way: *p* was such that: it obtains after *q* obtains?³

Chisholm's revised analysis of *later* takes both tense and temporal relations seriously, but Russellians might claim that it does not take temporal relations seriously enough. Let me explain.

In the above letter Chisholm claims that when he gave this analysis of '*p* obtained later than *q*' in *The First Person* he was "thinking of *later* as being asymmetric and nonreflexive, so that nothing could be said to be later than itself"⁴. Many philosophers and non-philosophers alike would say that Chisholm's earlier thinking about *earlier* and *later* was not whimsical or based on any momentary loss of good sense, but rather that Chisholm's thought struck at the essence of time. In other words, Russellians would claim that if one is really going to take temporal relations seriously, then one must provide an account of them that preserves their being asymmetrical and nonreflexive. Unfortunately, Chisholm's new analysis of '*p* obtained later than *q*' does not do this since '*p*' and '*q*' may stand for the same state of affairs, say, *Socrates is sitting* and that state of affairs was such that it obtains after it obtains. Thus, Chisholm gives up his initial thought that *later* is asymmetric in order to preserve the reality of tense. For the Russellians, however, giving up the logical properties of temporal relations is too big a price to pay for tense, and rather than pay it they deny that there are recurring tensed states of affairs.

We see then, that one motive for claiming that tense is unreal stems from the desire to preserve the logical properties of temporal relations. Of course, to offer a motive for a view is not to give a justification of it. Yet, it has been argued by Russell and others that if the time-series is to be constituted, suc-

cession must be an asymmetrical transitive relation.⁵ To pursue Russell's claim would, however, take us far beyond the scope of this note.

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¹ R. M. Chisholm: 1981, *The First Person* (Univ. of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis), p. 125.

² *Ibid.*, p. 128.

³ R. M. Chisholm: August 6, 1981, A letter to Professor Oaklander.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Compare B. Russell: 1915, 'On the experience of time', *Monist* 25, pp. 212–233, and 'Is position in time and space absolute or relative?' *Mind* (1901), pp. 293–317.