

The Temporal Present

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Abstract

It is easy to have about the temporal present, the time that is now, thoughts that seem both true and impossible. E.g., 'Now is the time that matters'. We may reflect that this is not just true but that 'it is always like that', that is: now is always the time that matters. Yet here we seem to be generalizing the ascription to the temporal present of a property that claims uniqueness, viz., being *the* time that matters. The present paper explores, in the case of the temporal present, the meaning and implications of this kind of impossible generalisation.

I

Philosophers have often remarked on a special connection between the temporal present and being (existence). The temporal present, roughly, the time we refer to as 'now', is the time at which events have being: the time at which they are there as potential objects of reference (there to be quantified over). This, we might say, is the – or at any rate, a – meaning to us of the temporal present; what the temporal present, now, means to us.¹

But do not past events have being in the same sense? I have just clumsily spilt your coffee. Can I not now apologize for what I have done (or, to secure an object of reference, should I have apologized while doing it)? Today we discuss yesterday's football match, and tomorrow we shall discuss today's. Reference to past events is, it would seem, as unproblematic as reference to what is occurring now. Past events – even those that have faded from memory, or escaped our knowledge altogether – have the same claim to being as present events.

¹ It should be evident that the concept of meaning employed here is not that of a Fregean sense. Frege's concept applies to expressions – in the present case, to the expression 'now'. The Fregean sense of 'now' would be given by using a synonym of that expression. Our interest lies not in the meaning (sense) of the expression 'now', but in the meaning or significance to us of the time to which that expression refers. (C.f. 'the meaning to the Swedes of summer', 'the meaning of Ramadam to Muslims', etc.)

Past events have being. That is, they now have being (they are now there to be referred to), though obviously they are not now occurring, i.e., coming to be. The being of an event must be distinguished from its occurring.

At one point in his agonizing about time Augustine suggests (it is not his settled view) that what is no longer occurring and thus is past no longer has being, and that what has not yet occurred and thus is future does not yet have being.² It would seem, then, that only what is occurring now, in the temporal present, has being. I would say that this is right about the future, but wrong about the past.

The view expressed here by Augustine is not confined to a bygone age in philosophy. A.N. Prior, endorsing Ramsey's idea that 'p is true' says no more than 'p', suggests that we should take 'He is eating his breakfast now' as saying no more than 'He is eating his breakfast', wherein the verb 'is eating' is understood as untensed. Prior's idea is that there is no difference between an event's being and its occurring now, in the present. Hence, as for Ramsey and 'is true', 'is now' is redundant. Confronted by the breakfast-eater, we might register the fact of breakfast-eating simply by using the untensed 'Eating going on', or 'Eating'. According to Prior, adding 'now' would add nothing.³

To the objection that 'Eating going on' might just as well refer to a past or future eating, Prior would reply that there are now no relevant eatings: no events to contrast with the events that are occurring now. This is why tense, including the present tense, is redundant. For an event to be now is just for it to be. (Tense gives way to simple being or existence.)

For Prior, then, there are no events with which to compare present events (except other present events). You cannot compare something with nothing. Yet it is commonplace to draw comparisons between present and past events. Today's weather, we observe, is an improvement over yesterday's. Is there a difficulty here?

In several passages of the *Philosophical Remarks*, Wittgenstein toys with the same dubious idea of incomparability. He says that when we think about time from the perspective of physics we are apt to treat

² Augustine's words are: 'Those two times, therefore, past and future, how are they, when even the past now is not, and the future is not as yet?' We are, note, replacing Augustine's reference to times with reference to events. 'The Confessions of Saint Augustine', Book XI, Chapter XIV, *The Basic Writings of Saint Augustine* vol. 1 (Random House), 191.

³ 'On Spurious Egocentricity', in *Papers on Time and Tense* (Oxford University Press, 1968), 29–30. Prior calls his view a 'no-present theory'. It might equally be called an 'only-present theory'.

future events as analogous to frames of a film strip which have yet to be projected on a screen (as, in this sense, ‘performed’) and past events as frames that have already been projected (Section 51). But it becomes evident that Wittgenstein has in mind a different conception. Thus a few pages later he remarks that,

The present we are talking about here is not the frame in the film that is in front of the projector’s lens at precisely this moment, as opposed to the frames before and after it, which have already been there or are yet to come; but the picture on the screen which would illegitimately be called present, since ‘present’ would not be used to distinguish it from past and future. And so it is a meaningless epithet. (Section 54)

What exactly does the film metaphor imply?

Wittgenstein’s point is not, I think, that the contrast between past, present and future time is meaningless. What is meaningless is the contrast between events as present, past and future. You can compare the frame now being projected on the screen with frames not now being projected; but there are no pictures to compare with the picture now on the screen. Similarly, though comparisons between times may be possible, there are no events to compare with events that are now occurring: only the events that are now occurring have being.

My view, as indicated above, would endorse Wittgenstein’s denial of being (existence) in the case of future events, but not in the case past events. Suppose it is true that I will snap my fingers in five seconds. Then, although there will occur and thereby come to be an event of finger snapping in five seconds, now, looking ahead, there is no such event, no (relevant) potential object of reference.⁴ In contrast, had I snapped my fingers five seconds ago, the event of finger-snapping, though not now occurring, would now be available for reference. ‘What was that noise?’, ‘Why did you do that?’

The view is: the present is when events come to be (occur) or acquire being, the past when events have being, and the future when events lack being (when there are no events).⁵

II

If we go along with this, the idea with which we began requires modification. The temporal present, now, is not the time at which events

⁴ See part II of my ‘The Irrevocability of Being’, *Philosophy* **87** (2011).

⁵ Ibid.

have being, but rather the time at which events come to be (acquire being, occur). Let us, then, adopt as our formula for the meaning of the temporal present,

(B) Now is the time of coming to be.

I want to discuss a problem about (B).

The problem relates to the occurrence of the definite article, which seems essential to (B). The temporal present is not just 'any' time. It is in some way special or highlighted. Out of the endless extent of time one bit stands out from all the rest, and that bit is *now*, the temporal present.⁶ The temporal present thus claims a certain uniqueness for itself, and any formula that purports to capture its meaning must reflect this uniqueness.

Hence the definite article. Now is not just 'a' time but, as (B) says, 'the' time at which events come to be.

It seems to me that, if we enter into this in the right way, we will not only agree with the foregoing; we will want to go further: we will want to add to what we assert in asserting (B) that 'it is always like that'. And is it not always like that? Is it not always the case that now is the time of coming to be?

This brings us to our problem (it is right at the surface). Uniqueness, we said, is essential to what the temporal present means to us. (B) states that the uniqueness is ontological: the temporal present is 'the' time of coming to be. The fact that (as we say) 'it is always like that' generalizes the uniqueness. But this seems impossible. How can now, the temporal present, *always* be *the* time of coming to be?

Notice how the problem, the impossibility, is implicit in our assertion that 'it is always like that'. Always like *what*? Always like this: now is the time of coming to be. In asserting that 'it is always like that', we assert what might be called an impossible generalisation.⁷

⁶ But how long is this 'bit', that is, how much time we mean to include under 'the temporal present', 'now'? (Augustine gets himself in a twist over this.) The problem we are about to raise does not require a general answer to this question. In any case, since the vague kind of answers that are possible in this regard depend on our interests at the time of using 'now', there is no general answer. (Thus the 'now' in 'We shall have to tighten our belts now', may refer to a single moment while getting dressed, or to the duration of The Second World War.)

⁷ A analogous impossibility emerges if we reflect in the right way on the self and solipsism; see my *Dream, Death and the Self* (Princeton University Press, 2007), chapter 11.

‘Smith is the man for the job.’ We choose Smith because, of the people in our office, he is the most qualified. It would make no sense to add that ‘the same is true of everyone in the office’. We think that Smith is in a certain way unique, and you cannot generalize uniqueness. (Everyone may be in their own way unique, but not in the same way.) Yet, regarding the uniqueness implicit in the meaning of the temporal present, the generalisation seems true.

At one point Prior comes close to recognising the problem. Recall, he says we can do without the present tense forms of verbs. In effect, for Prior the temporal present is the time that is tenseless. Thus all we need is ‘the root verb-form itself, as in “I eat” and “they eat” in English...’ He then adds ‘...if we understand that this is what we have with us all the time’.⁸ How is that possible? If now is, as we just put it, ‘the’ time that is tenseless, how can this be ‘what we have with us all the time’?

The problem, notice, has no counterpart in the case of space. The reason is that in the case of the spatial present (the place we refer to by ‘here’) there is no counterpart to the meaning of the temporal present. The spatial in contrast to the temporal present does not have a constant meaning for us. The relevant indexicals, ‘now’ and ‘here’, each have a constant rule which indexes reference to the changing times/places at which we speak. But the rule is unproblematic; it is the meaning that generates the impossible generalisation. Since in the case of the spatial present there is no meaning, there is in this case no problem.

‘It is always now.’ ‘I am always here.’ Both truths are the consequence of nothing more than the rules for ‘now’ and ‘here’; hence both are trivial. But in the case of ‘now’ versus ‘here’ there is in addition to the changing reference and constant rule, a further constant: the constant meaning.⁹ The consequence of the rule may be trivial, but the meaning, so far from being trivial, is the source of an impossibility.

⁸ Prior, *op. cit.*, p 21.

⁹ Hegel, in *The Phenomenology of Mind* (Part A, Section I), points out that whereas Now and Here – the references of ‘now’ and ‘here’ – regularly change, there is in both cases a ‘Universal’ that remains constant. Hegel’s Universal can be identified with the constant rule or, perhaps, with the Fregean sense (see note 1); but in the case of Now versus Here, there a further constant: the constant meaning.

III

What shall we say about this? It might be thought we are failing to take seriously the fact that 'now' is an indexical. But, in a way, the indexicality of 'now' is part of the problem. The rule for 'now' indexes its reference to the time of its use. Given that the time of use always changes, so does the reference. The problem is that while the rule entails that the time to which we refer always changes, the meaning of the temporal present entails that there is just one such time. The rule and meaning thus combine to create the problem.

A number of writers (Russell, Reichenbach, Gruenbaum, Smart, et. al.) seem to think the key to explicating the temporal present lies in the demonstrative. Suppose we replace (B) with,

(DB) Now is the time of *this* coming to be,

wherein the emphatic demonstrative refers to the current coming to be. Since the latter is always different, the time to which 'now' refers will always be different. That 'it is always like that' will thus be unproblematically true.

It seems to me that the foregoing explication of temporal presence gets things the wrong way around. In order demonstratively to refer to a given object, the object must *now* be directly available within experience. (You can pick out, demonstratively, a flash of lightning occurring now but not a flash that occurred yesterday.) If temporal presence is part of the explication of demonstrative reference, demonstrative reference cannot, in turn, be part of the explication of temporal presence.

Here is another idea. Imagine we are giving prizes for potted plants arranged in groups according to kind. We walk from group to group, point out a plant and say, 'This is the winner'. Were someone puzzled how we can judge of a number of plants that each is 'the' winner, we would explain that it is not the case that each is the winner full stop, but, although we did not bother to make this explicit, that each is the winner relative to this or that kind of plant. The uniqueness is always relativised to a kind.

The suggestion is that in stating (B) we have neglected to make explicit the fact that the ontological uniqueness it attributes to the temporal present must be relativised. To what? To itself, to the temporal present:

(RB) Now is the time of now coming to be.

Once (B) has been relativised in this way, there is no longer a problem. This is because (RB) is a tautology. Since a tautology is always true, it is unproblematic to assert about (RB) that 'it is always like that'.

On the other hand, as a tautology, (RB) is trivial. (RB) represents the meaning of the temporal present as a triviality. But is it not plain – some may part company with me here – that, whatever the temporal present means to us, it is not something trivial? (RB) fails, I think, to capture what the temporal present actually means to us.

Let us leave (B) unrelativised. There is, it may be said, another way to solve the problem. We need only suppose that (B) represents not how things are but only how they seem to us. That the temporal present seems to us (ontologically) unique is compatible with its not being unique. So, when we assert ‘it is always like that’, there is no problem. We may coherently suppose that, although it is never true that now is the unique time of coming to be, that is how it always seems to us.

The question is what we mean in this context by ‘how it seems to us’. The phrase can have either a doxastic or an experiential sense. On the first reading, (B) expresses what we believe, and our believing (B) is compatible with (B)’s being false. This will not help us. We, who are trying to solve the problem, believe (B). How then can we take (B) to be false? Believing *p* is taking *p* to be true.¹⁰ Yet if, believing (B), we assert that ‘it is always like that’, we embrace the impossible generalisation.

The experiential sense of ‘how things seem to us’ would appear more promising. In this sense, things may ‘seem to us’ in ways we believe false. E.g., it may seem to us (in the experiential sense) that our train is moving even though we believe the train is not moving. Assuming it is in the experiential sense that the temporal present ‘seems to us’ unique, it is coherent to suppose that we do not believe this; thus, despite it seeming that way, we might coherently assert about (B) that ‘it is always like that’. (Is it not possible that, in a certain respect, we realise that we are routinely subject to a false experiential seeming?)

There is a short and obvious objection to this. (B) gives expression to an abstract metaphysical proposition. It is nonsense to suppose that such a proposition might form the content of a perceptual seeming – as if we might look around us and, in light of how things appear, pronounce on the truth of (B).

¹⁰ If it is shown to someone that what he asserts is false, can he defend himself by saying ‘I do not claim that what I am saying is true, but only that I believe it to be true’?

IV

We are going to change tack now. Instead of entertaining further ‘solutions’ to our problem about the temporal present, we shall, leaving behind the abstract metaphysical proposition about time and being, attempt to relate the problem to matters that exercise us outside of philosophy, thereby bringing it closer to home.

The temporal present has a special connection not just with being but with value, that is, with what matters or is important to us; not just an ontological but, as we shall say, a valuational meaning. The valuational meaning of the temporal present may be stated as:

(V) Now is the time that matters.

Just by looking to its form we can see that (V), like (B), its ontological correlate, entails an impossible generalization. Yet it may not be clear how exactly we are to understand (V).

One might, for example, employ (V) by way of prompting someone who dwells on the past or constantly frets about the future. Such a person, like someone in a restaurant who keeps craning at what folks at other tables are eating and thus fails to enjoy the meal before him (the only meal he will get), fails to register the meaning of what is going on in his life (the only life he will get). But this is a problem only for certain dissatisfied individuals, while our problem about the temporal present is there for all of us.

Nor is the idea behind (V) that only what is occurring now is important. This is simply not true. An old love, the fate of my children – these things matter. It is a heroic but mindless pose to assert that only what is occurring now matters. While the advice to live for the present may be a useful corrective for excessive fears about the future or an obsession with the past, it is not what (V) is getting at.

What then is the valuational meaning of the temporal present? It concerns the standpoint of evaluation, that from which events have for us the importance or value that they have. Whatever matters to us – whether past, present or future – matters from the standpoint of the temporal present. It is from the standpoint of now, the temporal present, that things have for us the importance or value that they have.

Thus (V), as we shall understand it, carries no implications for the relative importance of present versus past or future events: it prescribes no particular attitude toward what is happening now versus what has happened or will happen. So (V) cannot help us choose between jam today and jam tomorrow. It purports to be not a piece

of practical wisdom but, as we might put it, a general truth about time and value.

With respect to evaluation, there are two distinctions on which to remark. First, where E is the evaluated event, we must distinguish the time at which E occurs from the time at which we evaluate E. Second, by an 'evaluation' we may mean either the event of evaluating or the content of the evaluation.

Events occur at one time or another. Thus E occurs at one time or another, and similarly with the event of evaluating E. But events do not occur 'from a temporal standpoint'; they just occur when they occur. We eat when we eat, sleep when we sleep. That is all there is to it. Similarly, we evaluate when we evaluate. What has a temporal standpoint is not the event of evaluating but the content of the evaluation – and, as (V) asserts, this standpoint is always that of the temporal present.

Let us compare time and space in this regard. Objects can be evaluated from a spatial as well as a temporal standpoint. We may distinguish the place or location of the object evaluated from our location in evaluating it. Here too there is an event/content distinction. As in the temporal case, standpoint is tied not to the event of evaluating but to its content; and in both cases our location in evaluating is tied not to the content but to the event. But there is this difference: whereas in the temporal case the standpoint is inescapably now, the temporal present, in the spatial case, it need not be here, the spatial present.

We walk around a garden, say. From here it looks nice...from here not so nice. So we have a series of possible standpoints on the garden, and from each there is a possible evaluation. But there is also the possibility of freeing our judgment from any of the particular standpoints we might adopt and of evaluating the garden as a whole. The as-a-whole evaluation may take account of all the possible standpoints, but it is not made from one as opposed to another. There is, it seems, no such possibility in the temporal case. We can, of course, evaluate a temporally extended event as a whole; however the as-a-whole evaluation will stubbornly retain the standpoint the temporal present.¹¹

It may be objected that in spatial evaluation I am always somewhere and, wherever that is, it is my spatial present: here. I can no more escape the spatial than the temporal present. But this misses the

¹¹ Something very much like this thought is ascribed to McTaggart by Michael Dummett (if I understand him) in his 'A Defence of McTaggart's Proof of the Unreality of Time', *Philosophical Review* 69 (1960).

point. It is not that, in evaluating, I can be nowhere versus nowhen; both are impossible. The point is that, unlike the temporal present, the spatial present need not be the standpoint from which I evaluate; the spatial versus temporal present need not, in this sense, condition the content of my evaluation.

I throw a party. As the evening progresses, I from time to time evaluate how things are going. At the end, I evaluate the party as a whole. The earlier evaluations are each made from the standpoint of the temporal present. But so is the final, as-a-whole evaluation. In reaching the as-a-whole evaluation, I take earlier evaluations into account, each of which has as its standpoint its own temporal present. The idea, however, is that the as-a-whole evaluation is just one more evaluation from the standpoint of now. The scope of the evaluation is greater, but the standpoint is always, inescapably, the same.

The earlier evaluations do not disappear; I may vividly recall them. They remain – but are themselves inevitably viewed from the standpoint of now. With this in mind, we shall say that the temporal present *dominates*. Earlier evaluations may be reevaluated in light of later ones (what earlier seemed full of promise may now seem headed toward failure); but all evaluations, including that of the whole, are equally subject to the dominance of the temporal present.

In spatial evaluation, on the other hand, there is a way of escaping how things look from here and forming a standpoint-neutral evaluation. True, we cannot view an object spatially except from this or that standpoint. But viewing an object is not evaluating it: the fact that evaluating an object presupposes a standpoint does not entail that we evaluate the object (if we do) from the standpoint from which we view it.

The inescapability of the temporal present remains, notice, if we shift our attention from events within our lives (like the party) to the open-ended, unfolding content that fills what each of us calls ‘my life’. At any stage in my life I can evaluate how things are going then or in the past. And I can, we all can (in some sense, we always do), evaluate of our lives ‘as a whole’. Yet whether we evaluate how things are going at a certain point, or our life as a whole, the evaluation is from the perspective of the temporal present – now.

Bernard Williams remarks in one place that ‘The correct perspective on one’s life is *from now*’.¹² But it is not just the ‘correct’ perspective. It is ‘the’ perspective: the only possible perspective. And not just

¹² ‘Persons, character and morality’, in *Moral Luck* (Cambridge University Press, 1981), 13.

on my life as a whole but on anything within my life – on anything, in fact, in time. The standpoint of now inescapably dominates.

Imagine we could view an object only by inserting differently coloured lenses, one on top of the other, between the object and ourselves. The latest lens is always placed closest, so that the cumulative effect of the lenses is filtered through it. The ‘dominance’ of the latest lens might be conceived as analogous to the dominance of the temporal present – but with this important difference: the dominance of the latest lens is the consequence of a contingent arrangement of objects, including ourselves, in space, whereas the dominance of the temporal present is inescapably part of our situation in time.

V

(V), like (B), ascribes uniqueness to the temporal present, and thus, like (B), gives rise to an impossible generalisation. (V) says that now is the time that matters: the time from whose standpoint things have the value they have.¹³ But, as in the case of (B), we will also assert that ‘it is always like that’. This means that, for every time, it is true of that time that now is the time that matters. How can that be? How can *every* time be *the* time that matters? We are, once again, asserting an impossible generalization.

Let us, to provide ourselves with some homilies on which to reflect, imagine an encounter between The Arrogance of Youth and The Conventional Wisdom.

When we are young death seems far off. (A little part of us may believe that, in ‘my’ case, it will never come.) From the temporal standpoint of Youth, things look good, since at whatever stage we are, we all agree it is better to have more than less time up ahead.¹⁴ Thus Youth may feel a kind of cockiness vis-à-vis those who are

¹³ At the risk of harping on the obvious, let us note that when in this philosophical context we use (V) or (B), we are not actually referring by ‘now’ to any particular time (that, say, at which I initially composed the paper). With, e.g., a philosophical use of (V), it is as if we said to the reader (including ourselves): ‘Consider any time and you will see that, referring by “now” to that time, i.e., referring to it as temporally present, you can truly assert that it is the time that matters.’ The philosophical use of (V) might be contrasted with an engaged use, one to whose possibility the philosophical use draws our attention.

¹⁴ As with all remarks of this kind, we must, of course, assume an ‘other things being equal’ rider.

old. It has an unarguable advantage, something you cannot take away from it. Something? The most important thing of all: time.

The Conventional Wisdom, of which Youth already has a sense, attempts to caution Youth against its arrogance. When we look at the old guy and feel safe, it asks us to reflect that once it was for him as it is for us now, that one day it will be for us as it now is for him. And when we are there, where he is, all the time we now have up ahead will no longer be up ahead, just as, for the old guy, all the time he once had up ahead is now in the past. Future 'now's' will dominate in the same way as now.¹⁵ One day there will be, for us, a 'now' from whose standpoint there is not much time left and whose evaluation is in that respect no longer positive.

Youth acknowledges platitudes of this kind (everyone does) but they are not, for Youth, the last word. The last word, that from which Youth derives its sense of safety and which seems to override all the wise talk about 'one day' this and 'one day' that, is very simple. It is, Youth says, the simple fact that *now*, unlike the old guy, I have a lot of time up ahead, and *now* is the time that matters.

Such thoughts have a kind of finality about them, a way of silencing The Conventional Wisdom. But not for long. Of course the Conventional Wisdom does not deny that Youth's time-advantage; nor that now is the time that matters. It merely seeks to remind Youth that now is *always* the time that matters. Youth says that it already knows this. But the Conventional Wisdom wonders whether Youth is letting it sink in, whether Youth is fully alive to the completeness with which each 'now' displaces its predecessors, hence to the way in which future 'now's' – from whose standpoint things will in the absence of the time-advantage not look so good – will have the same absolute dominance as now.

But, says Youth: These future 'now's' you keep going on about are not *now*, and *now* is the time that matters. Certainly, replies the Conventional Wisdom, it is always like that...

One bottom line replaces another.

¹⁵ The use of double quotes indicates that we are talking not about the expression 'now' (for which purpose we are using, as we just did, single quotes), but about one of a plurality of which now, the temporal present, is a particular instance. It will not be lost on the reader that the idea of such a plurality – like many other ideas and explanations we have employed, and will employ, in discussing our problem – itself contains the problem, in this case that we are talking about a plurality each of whose elements claims absolute uniqueness.

Which side is right? Both sides are right. Now *is* the time that matters and it *is* always like that. Such is the impossible generalisation.

In this imaginary confrontation between Youth and The Conventional Wisdom, the impossibility is out in the open. There are, however, areas of our experience wherein the impossibility figures implicitly. It will be of interest briefly to discuss two examples.

(1) Suppose we hear about a friend (S) dying in a plane crash. Why (apart from our grief) does this get to us in the way it does?

We imagine S in the midst of screaming, terrified passengers in an out-of-control plane plummeting towards the earth. S is knowingly faced by immanent death. What gets to us about S's situation relates to this.

The prospect of death is of itself awful. When it is the prospect of immanent death, it is more awful still – precisely because of its immanence. So much is obvious (though it may not be obvious in what the awfulness of death consists). I want, however, to draw attention to a further point, one that relates specifically to the temporal present.

S knows he is about to die. He is, we might say, knowingly approaching his last 'now'. Let us think about what this means. Now is the time from whose standpoint things have the value they have. The same, we know, holds for every 'now'. In the case of the last 'now', however, this fact acquires an enlarged significance. As the last 'now', the evaluation from its standpoint is unrevisable. Thus, given the absoluteness with which each 'now' dominates, the evaluation of the last 'now' in a real sense becomes *the* evaluation of S's life. The value of S's life, his whole life, is at the mercy of this last 'now'.

In contemplating S's death, we grasp the evaluative significance of his last 'now'. Our grasp of this significance contributes, I think, to our reaction to his death. It is part of what gets to us here.

Note how the impossible generalisation comes into this: it is implicit in the concept of the last 'now'. The last 'now', in being now, is the unique time that matters; as the 'last' such time, however, it is preceded by a string of similarly unique 'now's'. A string of 'now's' all unique in the same way. Here, of course, we have our impossibility.

The circumstances in which S faces his last 'now' are particularly awful. Most of us will not face anything this extreme; but most of us (there are exceptions) will have to deal with a last 'now'. For most of us, then, the value of our lives will – at some time or other, in some circumstances of other – be unrevisably at the mercy of a last 'now'. And this, whatever the circumstances, is in its own way awful.

Yet circumstances do matter. Dying in bad circumstances – in terror, in pain, plagued by a sense of failure, with worries about people who are important to us (bad possibilities abound) – cannot but cast a shadow over the unrevisable evaluation. S's situation conspires against a positive evaluation. His is not a good way to die. This obviously contributes to our reaction when we contemplate S's final moments.

How things work out at the end for us depends, in part, on luck, on where the wheel of life happens to stop, on a good 'now' or bad 'now'. It is not that a good time at the end can compensate for earlier misfortunes; or that, as in a picture, the goodness or badness of the whole can be crucially affected by that of a single part.¹⁶ No, luck matters so much at the end because of the evaluative dominance of the temporal present; because, that is, of the way the whole of our lives is thus exposed to the evaluation of the last 'now'.

(2) The second example (alluded to above) in which a grasp of the impossible generalisation figures in our experience relates not to anything as extreme as imminent death but, on the contrary, falls within comfortable everyday life.

Lots of us know the desire to have a drink because it will make us feel good. What does this 'feeling good' involve? It is more than just a pleasant glow or sensation. If we are bothered about something, a pleasant sensation provides at best a distraction: the phenomenology is that of shutting out something we know is there. The 'feeling good' that comes with drinking alcohol has, or may have (it need not work like this all the time, or for everyone) a different phenomenology. It does not just distract us from what looks bad but changes how things look. What was bothering us looks different – not so bad, or maybe even good. Drink has the power not merely to drown our sorrows; it can alter them.

This provides a (potentially dangerous) motive for having a drink, a motive in which the dominance of the temporal present and hence the impossible generalisation play a crucial part. When things – we include here not just what is going on now but the past as well as what we anticipate, the whole of one's life – look good/bad, then that is how things look: good/bad. Having a drink or two can affect how one's whole looks. It can make it look better than it is.

I tell myself, 'I shall have a drink and then I shall feel good'. Why do I think that? It is because at some level I know that when the rosy

¹⁶ This seems to be Aristotle's view in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (I.10). The goodness of a good end to life consists, for Aristotle, in its being essential to the goodness of a good human life considered as a whole.

'now' comes, it will displace all others and thus dominate; that, after having the drink, life will look good. I shall evaluate my life like this: life is good. Not, mind you, good *now*, but good *full stop*. If the way life looks were relativised to the temporal present, I would conceive it as temporary – which would undermine my motive for having a drink.

There is an element of double-mindedness in this. When pouring the drink, we anticipate that life will look not temporarily but simply good; yet we know full well that the effects of the drink will be temporary and that the facts of our life will not thereby change. This means that, in pouring the drink, we aim to bring about a belief on our part that we now believe will be false. That is, we know that when the rosy standpoint dominates we will believe that life is good, and also that, since nothing will have changed, our belief will be false.

However, there is more to it. When, from the standpoint of the rosy 'now', we believe that life is good, we will at the same time know that our belief is the result not of a change in the relevant facts but of the drink. After all, our aim in taking the drink was to make it the case that life looks good. (Can we have forgotten this?) Thus, from the standpoint of the rosy 'now', we will both believe that life is good and know that life is not as good as we believe.

In other words, we will deceive ourselves. In fact, this might be described as our aim in having the drink: we aim to exploit the way in which the temporal present dominates for the purpose of deceiving ourselves.

Notice, the rosy 'now' which we anticipate while pouring the drink is, in the nature of the case, not now but in the future. Hence the project of deceiving ourselves depends on knowing that the future 'now' will dominate in the same way that now dominates. How do we know this? We know it because we know that 'it is always like that'. A grasp of the impossible generalisation is thus crucial to our project of self-deception.

That bad habits involve self-deception is hardly a novel insight; what is perhaps less apparent is the way in which our self-deception in such cases may involve a grasp of the impossible generalisation.

VI

In Section III, we rejected several attempts to solve our problem about the temporal present. To conclude, we shall briefly consider an idea that claims not to solve the problem, but to take the sting

out of it, a way of (so to speak) philosophically downgrading the problem.

Ever since McTaggart introduced his A- and B-series,¹⁷ philosophers of time have recognized a distinction between facts to the effect that events or times are past/present/future (A-facts) and facts about the temporal order and location of events and times (B-facts). A-facts are generally regarded as more problematic than B-facts. McTaggart claims that A-facts entail a contradiction and, on this basis, concludes that time is unreal.¹⁸ Others regard the problematic character of A-facts as a reason for denying not the reality of time but the reality of A-facts.¹⁹

If this denial is to be at all plausible, it cannot mean that there literally are no A-facts. I am now typing, not talking; the guy at the next table is now talking, not typing. A-propositions are sometimes true, sometimes false. When they are true, they are A-facts. For what is a 'fact' if not, as Frege says, a true proposition?²⁰ The idea that there just *are* no A-facts, that no A-proposition is ever true, strikes me as absurd.

What the denial is (I suspect) getting at is not that A-facts are not real but, in contrast to B-facts, that they are not intrinsic to reality. Consider a different contrast, that between the fact that a given physical entity exists (that there is such an entity) and the fact it appears or is experientially present. The latter fact depends, in a certain way, on consciousness: it holds only from within consciousness. If there were no such thing as consciousness, there would be no such fact. The fact,

¹⁷ *The Nature of Existence*, Volume II, Book V, Chapter XXXIII, (Cambridge University Press, 1927).

¹⁸ The 'contradiction' is, roughly, that although the members of the past/present/future triad are incompatible, every event is all three. Notice how this differs from our problem. McTaggart's problem might be raised by asking how, given the incompatibility of the triad, an event can be not just temporally present but also past and future; our problem, by asking how, given the meaning of the temporal present, an event can be temporally present.

¹⁹ See, for example, D.H. Mellor, *Real Time II* (Routledge 1998), chapters 1 and 2.

²⁰ 'The Thought: A Logical Inquiry', reprinted in P.F. Strawson ed. *Philosophical Logic* (Oxford University Press, 1967), 35. Hence anyone who, like Mellor, denies that there are A-facts while recognizing that there are true tensed propositions (or sentences), will need an alternative to Frege's conception of a fact. Mellor's conception is that not of a true proposition but a 'truth-maker', an entity that makes a true proposition true. See *ibid.*, Chapter 2, section 2.

e.g., that the glass in front of me exists, this fact does not need consciousness; it holds on its own. On the other hand, the fact that the glass is experientially present, that it appears, this holds only from within consciousness. Without consciousness there would be no such fact.²¹

The idea is that facts of temporal presence (and, more generally, A-facts) are like facts of experiential presence: they hold only from within consciousness. Take away consciousness and events would still occur when they occur and in the order they do; but no event would ever be temporally present, past or future (before or after now). This does not mean, of course, that it is an *illusion* that events are past, present and future. If it were an illusion, it would not be true, i.e., a fact, that (say) there is now a glass in front of me. But it is a fact – a fact that holds only from within consciousness.²²

The foregoing yields a sense in which A-facts versus B-facts are ‘not intrinsic to reality’: A-facts hold only from within consciousness; B-facts hold independently of consciousness. The propositions that now is the time that matters and that it is always like that (the impossible generalisation), are propositions that concern the temporal present. They are propositions, then, that are true (are facts) only from within consciousness. It follows that our problem exists only from within consciousness, that it is not intrinsic to reality. This, it would seem, counts as a ‘downgrading’ of the problem.

A downgrading, not a solution of the problem. A solution would reveal a mistake in the impossible generalisation. If we had a solution, we would no longer believe the generalisation and would no longer be puzzled. The downgrading does not help us in this respect. Assuming we accept the downgrading, we will still be puzzled. Let us make clear why this is so.

The plausibility of the downgrading depends on the fact that the status of ‘holding only from within consciousness’ does not alter the truth of A-propositions and hence does not commit us to the absurdity that all such propositions are false (that there are no A-facts).

²¹ One might reflect: ‘Suppose God eliminated consciousness. Would it not still be true that the sun is *now* behind a cloud?’ What we overlook here is that our use of ‘now’ owes its possibility to our standpoint in reflection rather than to the standpoint of the possible world on which we reflect.

²² It may be worth remarking that the conception of consciousness in play here is not the conception of something ‘going on’ or ‘occurring’ in us (in our heads or souls), that is, of a phenomenon, but of consciousness as a ‘that from within which’, or what we might regard as a kind of horizon. (See *Dream, Death and the Self*, op.cit.)

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Generally, if we put to one side the philosophical beliefs which comprise our accepting it, the downgrading leaves our beliefs about time unaltered (this is a major point in its favour). In the nature of the case, then, the downgrading cannot provide us with a reason to cease believing (as we do) that now is the time that matters and that it is always like that; a reason, in other words, to cease believing the impossible generalisation.

The downgrading offers us a perspective in which our problem about the temporal present is revealed as not intrinsic to reality. In this way we may derive a kind of philosophical relief. Yet we will remain puzzled, since adopting the perspective leaves us believing the propositions that are the source of our puzzlement. A curious outcome. If we believe the propositions and accept the downgrading, we will be both puzzled and philosophically relieved.

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