**The Present – What it is and why it Matters**

In contemporary philosophy of time, there is a great deal of discussion about the past and the future, very little discussion of the present. There are a number of reasons for this, most prominent of which is the prevalence of Four-Dimensionalism in the philosophy of time, which typically favors a tenseless theory of time and rejects temporal passage as an illusion. Since the present is where temporal passage occurs in experience in such a way that it is, on reflection, inconceivable without it, a Four-Dimensionalist has a natural tendency to dismiss the present as illusory. Certainly, it cannot be characterized in the abstract, timeless, and “objective” terms that we use to discuss the past and future. Again, the past and the future raise such interesting philosophical questions (Does the past exist? If the future exists, does that mean that it is incapable of being changed? Can we change the past? Is time travel into the past and the future metaphysically possible?), whereas the present seems dull and quotidian by comparison, and so without much intrinsic philosophical interest. This leads us to what I suspect is the main cause of the neglect of the present: the present seems so ordinary, so ubiquitous, and so immediate that is seems at first glance to resist the sort of objectification to which the past and future naturally lend themselves – a fact significant in itself if we only reflect upon it. Nevertheless, in this essay I propose to discuss the present *as such*. It is *high time* that this topic was broached. Let’s do it *now*.

As I mentioned just now, Four-Dimensionalists seem to have little to say about the present. There really isn’t much room for considering it within the overall fabric of their theory, except as some sort of illusion that philosophy and science somehow exposes and corrects. However, as I have argued elsewhere, temporal passage is not and cannot be an illusion.[[1]](#footnote-1) I thus endorse Presentism. Further, being a metaphysical realist (albeit a dualist as well) I deny the tempting Augustinian thesis that temporal passage is merely an artifact of conscious awareness. As I have argued elsewhere, given that our conscious experience occurs in time, so too must the states of the brain upon which conscious experience in some sense depends and so too whatever causes those brain states, so that temporal passage belongs to apprehensible extramental reality, no matter how conceived, as a whole.[[2]](#footnote-2) Everything that exists at any time is *in* time and exists *through* time for as long as it exists. I thus find myself committed (by default) to the A-theory of time. It is the irrefragable character of lived experience, not philosophical speculation as such, that has led me to this commitment. As such, however things stand with regard to Special Relativity, if we have to choose between them our choice ought to be dictated by the fact that Special Relativity is an in principle revisable theory whereas temporal passage is an irrevisable fact.[[3]](#footnote-3) With these controversial (and here largely unargued) background assumptions in place, without which this topic would be of little interest, let us proceed.

**The Nature of the Present**

Any metaphysical account of the present has to begin with our lived experience of the present. “Present,” after all, is etymologically related to “presence”: *the* present is that to which I am present and which therefore *is present* to me. My conscious awareness of things, events, and states-of-affairs in time and thus as framed by ineluctable and irreversible temporal passage constitute the present for me and thus my apprehension of the present considered as something existing in its own right independently of my awareness of it. Presence in the first sense as that of which I am currently aware – as what I would describe as the content of my act of awareness if I were asked to characterize what I am aware of *now* and thus which is currently present to me – presupposes presence in the second sense in which presence refers to a *relation of a mutual co-presence* that need not involve conscious awareness at all. This sort of mutual co-presence, in turn, is rooted in *simultaneous mutual co-existence*, i.e. “existing at the same time.” Save for Presentism, however, this sort of mutual co-existence would be only necessary, not sufficient, for this sort of co-presence. After all, from a Four-Dimensionalist point of view, such relations of mutual co-existence can be specified for things said to exist at any tenselessly identifiable moment. Given Presentism, however, only the present actually exists and only those things that exist in the present are actual; hence, only presently existing things can be characterized as co-existent. What things currently exist, hence co-exist, is constituted by objective facts that in no way depend on consciousness, let alone *my* conscious experience. At the same time, my only access to the present is through my conscious experience. More than this, the “presentness” of the present, like my awareness of my own existence or status as a *res cogitans* is something directly and immediately apprehended by me in such a way as to be incorrigible for me and thus neither admitting nor requiring an explanation or external epistemic justification in order to be certain for me. While this same incorrigible certainty does not extend to the contents of my current awareness as actually existing (these could be the products of illusion or hallucination) that I am currently clearly and distinctly aware that such-and-such or so-and-so has the incorrigibility traditionally associated with descriptive reports of the contents of my current sense-experience, and so the same extrinsic certainty. This is a fact about which we cannot be wrong however we choose to explain it, and remains so even if we cannot explain it at all.

This is all very vague. One could hardly expect otherwise in any case. However, we can perhaps make things less obscure by focusing alternately on the present as constituted independently of consciousness and then on features of our awareness of temporal passage in relation to these contents understood from a realist perspective, and thus in this way reach dialectical closure concerning the notion of the present without, however, arriving at either a metaphysical or scientific account of the present *as such*. Let us begin from our immediate awareness of temporal passage as we experience it in consciousness.

Consciousness *as the medium of experience* takes the form of an intentional field of awareness in which Kant’s two forms of intuition (space and time as transcendentally necessary conditions for the possibility of experience) are inseparably combined and permit the representation of a changing panoply of external objects to a persisting experiential subject, without which unity of consciousness, and so of conscious experience, would be impossible. Representational experiential contents are impossible for us except as occupying space. More than this, in order for such contents to constitute the ongoing, unified, and structured representation of a *world* of such objects requires that they be ordered by spatial and temporal relations to one another. Discrete objects have to be represented as closer to or farther away from the place occupied by my body taken as a reference point, and as being next to, to the left of, near or far away, lying at some distance from, or in some other manner related to every other discrete object co-existing with that discrete object, the body as located in space. Since I am here assuming realism, these relations represented in consciousness also exist externally to it in a manner that is not dependent on their being known by/experienced by us. They are thus objectively constituted in the external world as real (in this case external) relations that hold between each thing and every other thing regardless of how much distance lies between those things. In the same way, such contents will also be experienced as occurring before, after, or at the same time as every other event that actually exists, obtains, or occurs at any time, whether or not it is currently possible for us to know what these relations are.

The inseparability of space and time in the intentional field of awareness in which representational contents are experienced as representing a world of objects makes what is often referred to as our perceptual field, a single “manifold” without proper parts. There is no separable “temporal field” in perceptual experience. In being inseparably combined with space in experience, time is thus integrated into our experience of space as though diffused throughout it and thus has to be seen as possessing breadth as well as direction. In turn, the present has such breadth as well, a fact that may well surprise those of us who have been influenced by Augustine’s famous argument in *Confessions* XI, in which he argues that the present has no breadth at all, but shrinks to an infinitesimal point.[[4]](#footnote-4) Since Augustine is a Presentist, at least in this context, this seems to entail that time, as such, does not exist (and for that matter, neither does anything else). However, I contend that the illusion of the “vanishing present” really is an illusion, one that comes about as a consequence of our attempting to focus introspectively on the present *as such* independently of our experience of the perceptual manifold. This leads to a distorted view of what the present is, one completely different from our actual lived experience of the present as part of that manifold.[[5]](#footnote-5)

When we avoid this error and turn instead to lived experience, we find that what counts as present for us is everything that is or can in principle be present to me *now*. To put it another way, the present consists of everything that co-exists at the *present moment of time*, whether or not I am actually (or even realistically could be) aware of it. My access to the present, considered as the current state-of-affairs that obtains in the universe, is through what is currently present to me in experience. However, the present itself *as such* is not limited just to these things, but instead includes everything that belongs to that total state-of-affairs of which my lived experience is a partial and limited apprehension. Thus we can distinguish the *now*, which is limited to my subjective awareness of the present, from the *present moment of time*, which objectively constitutes the present that I am subjectively aware of now in a limited and partial manner. The difference here consists at least in this: if there were no conscious subjects, there would be no now, whereas there could in principle still be an existing world subject to temporal passage and thus a present moment of time. Indeed, our standard ideas of natural history suppose precisely this to be the case: the world existed and change occurred in that world for a very long time before sentient beings ever even existed, let alone became aware of temporal passage. Thus, there can be a world-process subject to temporal passage, the currently existing/obtaining/occurring moment of which constitutes the present moment, even if no self-conscious rational subject exists to apprehend it as the now and its contents as what’s happening now.[[6]](#footnote-6)

This, I think, helps make things a bit clearer. Even so, the foregoing requires correction in order to prevent confusion. The foregoing may suggest that the present consists *only* of the most recent moment of time, landing us once again in the Augustinian quandary. Certainly, the present does have a leading edge, a point of entry for new contents into the perceptual manifold.[[7]](#footnote-7) It is typical for us to imagine that, just as objects moving in a straight line through space are seen to move through the perceptual field, entering from one side and exiting through the other that in the same way, new contents that spontaneously enter the perceptual manifold, tend to endure in consciousness for a while, and then pass irrecoverably into memory. Nevertheless, for as long as these contents are present to consciousness, even if not adverted to, they (and their *per se* causes) constitute and thus exist in the present.

Nevertheless, the foregoing presents only a sufficient but not necessary condition for some thing’s being in or belonging to the present. Without committing ourselves to Hume’s empiricism, we may nevertheless use Hume’s talk of impressions and ideas to make this point a little clearer. Humian impressions arise spontaneously in lived experience and are perceived as persisting in and through time for at least as long as we continue to be aware of them; they are what I am immediately aware of *now*, *at the present moment*. Impressions thus occur in the *real time* of lived experience. As such, impressions always belong to the present, whether or not they are the focus of my attention at the time they are present in consciousness.

As the name suggests, impressions carry with them an awareness of our passive receptivity with regard to both their presence in consciousness and the nature of their contents. Unless I close my eyes in order to prevent my seeing, both my seeing and what I see lies beyond the power of my will to directly control through an act of volition. My voluntary control over what I see is at best indirect and involves my putting myself in a position to view something I have for some reason chosen to see. However, unless idealism is true, my act of seeing cannot create or constitute its own object. As such, I can only see what is there to be seen, i.e. what exists at the same time that I do and only for as long as it exists. For this reason, some impressions are *renewable* after a lapse of time. I look away from my computer and gaze a photo of my wife on the bookshelf; I turn back to my computer, but then after a few moments I look back to the photo again. When I first looked at the photo of my wife, I had an impression of that thing and its aesthetic contents. When I looked back, I had another impression of that thing. Since the picture continues to exist through time along with me, it remains something that can be a continuing source of impressions for me. As long as it continues to exist and so is potentially present to me in lived experience, even if it is not currently a source of impressions by being at the focus of my attention, it belongs to the present of which my lived experience at the present moment is a partial and incomplete apprehension. The present, then, has breadth; even if my impressions are momentary, the present is not. Neither are those objects that are present to me in such a way as to be capable of being present in experience by means of Humian impressions.

By contrast, I made some notes concerning some errands my wife wanted me to run today on a piece of paper yesterday. I inadvertently threw the note away and it went to the incinerator. The note no longer exists, hence does not exist now, and so is no longer present in any of the senses I distinguished above. Since it does not exist now, I am no longer able to consult it in lived experience at the present moment, which is to say that it is no longer capable of being a source of impressions for me. I am now desperately trying to remember what the note said, and in the process have had occasion to consult my memory for an *idea* of that note, trying to revive a copy of an earlier impression of it. While Humian ideas are formed involuntarily, they are directly accessible for me by an act of will. At the same time, lacking the “force and vivacity” of the original impression or set of impressions from which it is derived, it also lacks the clarity and distinctness that attaches to that original. In my case, this is so much so that I am quite uncertain what the note said or whether I have remembered its complete contents. (Needless to say, I’m screwed.)

Hume was a skeptic who regarded impressions as “original existences,” i.e. surd facts for which we can neither can ask nor need an explanation. From the realist perspective I am assuming here, however, I take it for granted that (whatever transcendental machinery is involved in the constitution of impressions as present in consciousness) my impressions have external causes and that they stand in what I have elsewhere called the EOG relation to those causes. The external causes of my impressions are thus their *per se* causes that continue to exist/obtain for the whole time that those impressions are either occurring or renewable for me. In other words, my impressions and their causes exist *at the same time* – this is a necessary condition for the possibility of any impression at any time I have one. As such, if (as is incorrigibly evident to me) my mental contents, including all my impressions, are subject to temporal passage, come into and out of experience, and so on, so too must be their causes as well. Therefore, temporal passage cannot be an illusion in sense that it is something confined solely to consciousness as a feature of our psychology and limited merely to how we experience the world.

Following the current wisdom, most people today would identify the proximate *per se* causes of my impressions with brain-states. Even substance dualists like myself concede this; for their part materialists, especially reductive materialists who want to identify impressions with brain-states, are even more deeply committed to this picture of things. If lived experience is subject to temporal passage, and the contents of lived experience are *per se* causally dependent on the brain states that serve as their ontological ground, then so too must be those brain states. In turn, the same applies to the bodily states of the sense-organs, etc. that cause my brain-states, and the external events that cause those bodily states, all of which require at least a “contact moment” involving *per se* causation, in which case, despite what many people say, everything that exists is also – and necessarily – subject to temporal passage.[[8]](#footnote-8) As such, if we even so much as experience temporal passage at all, then on the realist view temporal passage is an objective feature of external reality as well. No theory, then, that implies the contrary can be the literal truth about the noumenal world, unless we are willing to abandon realism of every kind and embrace some kind of skepticism or idealism.

Since the existence/obtaining/occurrence of the proximate *per se* cause of an impression (e.g. a brain state) is necessary for the existence/obtaining/occurrence of that impression in consciousness, it must operate at the same time that the impression is present in consciousness. When that state ceases to exist/obtain/occur (etc.) the impression is no longer renewable and its content is now accessible only as an idea retrievable from memory in the form of a *per accidens* effect of that brain-state taking the form of a less vivid copy of the relevant impression – what Hume calls an *idea.* Even though my contemplation of that idea is something that can only occur at the present moment, it refers to something that in the present context concerns a past experience recalled precisely as such. By analogical extension, my imaginative consideration of any past state-of-affairs, whether or not I or anyone else actually experienced it, though occurring in the present, has as its intentional object some past state-of-affairs which in many cases has ceased to exist and is thus beyond recovery in the present even if some elements of that state-of-affairs are still extant. So, given that it still exists, a man may return to the place where he was born but not to the state-of-affairs that obtained at that time.

In the same way, and again contrary to what many people say, my idea of earlier and later *in time*, as opposed to some other sort of tense-independent relation of dependence or priority, can only be derived from my lived experience of temporal passage. Those things, events, and states-of-affairs that I apprehend in lived experience to be prior to others I experience subsequently in the course of that experience are retained in memory as earlier and later relative to each other. If I wanted to imaginatively relive those states-of-affairs as I originally experienced them I would have to contemplate those events in a particular order, the one that recapitulates those events as I lived through them. Given the fallibility of memory and the blandishments of self-deception, this is often much harder than it seems. In the same way, in attempting to grasp the order of events (etc.) in the past that have long since ceased to exist and for concerning which no one now alive has any active memories (and by doing so establish relations of “earlier” and “later” between them) requires that we reconstruct those events in a series reflecting the order in which they occurred in real time. This, again, is often more difficult than it initially seems that it ought to be as both political and natural historians can attest. I submit that we have no notion of “earlier” and “later” *in time* other than this one, which is obviously and ineliminably parasitic on our experience of temporal passage as part of lived experience.

All impressions exist/occur in the present moment, i.e. are apprehended in real time. Many, indeed most impressions possess representational and intentional content and are thus capable of directing our attention beyond that content, which in turn effaces itself in favor of the intentional object represented by that content. Nevertheless, because the process by means of which we apprehend these intentional objects is mediated by physical and physiological processes in nature there is always a time-lag – often extremely small but always measurable in principle – between our apprehension of the intentional object and the state of that object as it was when these mediating processes were initiated.[[9]](#footnote-9) Even so, it remains that the (e.g.) image-content of an instance of visual perception always represents its intentional object as it was a fraction of a second ago rather than it is *now*, at the present moment, i.e. the moment at which I am entertaining that image-content as a Humian impression. In most cases, this time-lag is so small that it is, for all practical and theoretical purposes, utterly negligible because the object has changed so little in the interim that anything that I say about it *now* will still be true of it as it is now. In a few cases, however, the time-lag is significant enough that it can be a source of perceptual error. For example, I look through a telescope and see a particular star ten billion light-years away. In that case, the light that is currently striking my eye left that star ten billion years ago. As such, even if that star went nova a billion years ago and shortly thereafter ceased to exist, it is still represented to me as a something real and existent. This is an artifact of the process of physical mediation that connects my current sensory impression to its intentional object, one due to the fact that this process *occurs in* and thus *takes* ***real*** *time in the external world* – not just “psychological time.” As such, although this sort of example is sometimes used to argue that we have no awareness of “A-facts” and thus that there is no temporal passage the very possibility of such an example presupposes that there is temporal passage occurring as a part of nature quite independent of our awareness of temporal passage in lived experience.[[10]](#footnote-10)

I cannot have occurrent mental states or acts either in the past or the future, only in the present. As such, whatever I directly and immediately apprehend at any time belongs to and occurs in the present and it is impossible that this be otherwise. The same does not follow concerning the intentional objects of all acts of perception, memory, or imagination. Quite the contrary, I can think about or imagine all sorts of things that no longer, do not yet, nor ever will exist. In the same way I can be perceptually presented with something that no longer exists when certain rare (but otherwise perfectly ordinary) circumstances obtain, as in the example of the star discussed immediately above. The most that this entails is that the actual order in which I experience events in time does not always or necessarily correspond to their objective order of occurrence in real time, but this fact is so obvious and familiar that I think that no significant philosophical conclusions can be drawn from it, or, if they can, they tell against critics of Presentism. Since lived experience is our only point of access to the real world existing beyond the limits of mere consciousness, our ability to distinguish the objective order of events in time and our subjective awareness of that order of events in time is one that we can exercise and employ only within lived experience. Anything beyond this can only be a theoretical construct of some kind. For this reason if no other, the so-called “B time-series” can be reconstructed only through reflection on lived experience, which allows us to distinguish the objective order of events in time from our mode of awareness of events in time from within lived experience itself in relation to objective relations of “earlier” and “later” in time between “events.” As such, unless there are A-facts, we can have no access to “B-facts” if indeed there are even any such facts. Thus, if we can even so much as construct the sempiternal “B-series” then there is also a real, genuine A-series of events in time from which it is derived. Due to this, we have no reason to suppose that the so-called “B-series” is anything more than a theoretical construct and thus that it corresponds to anything that actually exists outside the mind.[[11]](#footnote-11)

**Past, Present, and Future**

So much, then, for what we can say about the present by reflecting on lived experience, which reveals that temporal passage is an ineluctable and irrefragable fact concerning of which we can be extrinsically certain and which on any realist metaphysics cannot be merely a feature of subjective experience. Continuing the process of clarification here requires that we dispel some confusions that arise when we think about the present in relation to the past and the future. We have a number of natural “intuitions” – really nothing more than imagistic metaphors – that tempt us into false questions about the nature of the past and the future, and thus of our relations to them. Most of these are so familiar that we fall into thinking in accordance with them without a second thought, yet are such that they only need to be made explicit in order for their inherent absurdity to become apparent.

For example, spatial metaphors are both inevitable and ineliminable from our discussion of time. Nevertheless, such metaphors can be fatally misleading if not managed properly. It is very easy, for example, to think of the present as a kind of fixed point that I occupy and to think of the events I apprehend as in motion relative to me – in which case time is “passing me by” and threatening to leave me “stuck in the past.” It is just as intuitive, however, for me to suppose that movement through time is like movement through space – it is I who moves through time, just as it is I who moves through space as, e.g. I travel from Seattle to Tacoma. In accordance with this imagistic metaphor, it is events that are at a standstill relative to me, like the objects on the side of the road as I travel by car. In that case, I approach future events, understood as fixed points to which I get closer as I travel through time, while past events continually recede from me in the temporal distance of the past like the objects that that whiz by and recede from sight in my rear-view mirror. Thus, I think of myself as each day closer to death, conceiving of my death as though it were a fixed point in the future with which I am on a collision course. This is nonsense. My being one day closer to death than I was yesterday does not entail that my death is fatalistically set for some determinate future time, simply that I have less time left to live today than I did yesterday. Even in saying this, I recognize that the time left for me between now and my death does not correspond to any determinate amount of time in the same way that the distance between Seattle and Tacoma I still have to travel when driving *en route* corresponds to a determinate distance that can be computed in miles.

Paradoxically, we often reverse this picture in the way that we the mix imagistic metaphors when talking about movement through space. As I drive to Tacoma, I get closer to Tacoma and Tacoma gets closer to me, so that we use expressions like “Tacoma is coming up” or “The house I was born in is coming up on the right” as though it was Tacoma or the house I was born in that was approaching me rather than the other way around. This causes no problem in the spatial context, and no one is fooled. In the case of time, however, there is a persistent tendency to fall into the habit of thinking of the “flow” of time as involving the approach of future events through the present and into the past.[[12]](#footnote-12) Here we are once again at a fixed point and temporal events are rushing past me – however, in a different direction from the earlier conception. (“The future’s coming at ya! Better be ready for it!”) This, too, is absurd. Time flows in the direction of the future from the past, not the other way round.

The least confused way to think about this, and thus the closest we can come to a proper understanding of our relation to time, is to see ourselves as existing in time, and advancing along with it, ineluctably carried forward, as all things are, in a present moment encompassing everything coexisting at that moment. As we move forward in lockstep with the advance of time, some things that exist at one point in time cease to exist at another, other new things that did not yet exist at that point come into existence, and each serves its turn by corresponding to a lapse of time enclosed by the endpoints of its existence: coming-to be and passing away. I am neither at rest with regard to time nor is time at rest with regard to me; we are both in motion together.

However, that does not make us equal partners in the existential enterprise. That supposition will also tend to evoke the sort of confusion that leads to questions that are unanswerable because ill-formed, such as “How long does the present last?” and “How quickly does time flow?” We can sensibly ask questions such as “How long did Kant live?” or “How fast does Fred run?” of things that are in time, because we can quantify these properties of things using a conventional metric. However, to ask questions like this of time itself is to treat time as though it were a process happening in time, and it is not. This is an illusion, perhaps born from the fact that we are able to use clocks to – as we say – measure time and may mistakenly suppose that in doing so we are tracking some intrinsic quantitative feature of time itself.[[13]](#footnote-13) But, just as a meter stick can only be used to measure distances in space because it is itself in space, has length and is conventionally calibrated so that it can be applied to the measurement of other lengths in space, so too a clock can measure the length and speed of processes occurring in time because it also instantiates such a process, one conventionally calibrated to provide a standard for such measurements. A clock can accomplish this task only because it exists in and through time and is mechanically constructed in such a way as to allow us to apply a dependable, regular (albeit arbitrary and conventional) metric to the passage of time. In both cases, the conventional metric is applied from an external point of view dictated largely by our practical interests and does not reflect anything intrinsic to space or time themselves other than distance and temporal passage which, considered in themselves, possess no intrinsic metric. With regard to these, though not to time itself, it makes sense to ask how long they last or at what speed they occur, and to imagine that they might happen faster or slower. Our practices of measuring distance and telling time, like the use of paper currency, are mere conventions that persist because we find them supremely useful and do not reflect any deep metaphysical truth about the nature of space or time, or exchange-value and monetary worth.[[14]](#footnote-14)

The most persistent source of mythical thinking about time, however, is the pervasive and practically ineliminable tendency to think as time as divided into three co-existent realms, the past, present, and future and to think of events as “moving” from the future to the present and from the present to the past, remaining the same through this entire process and changing only their external relation to the present moment taken as a fixed and immovable point. Indeed, many people take this either to be the Presentist point of view or entailed by its truth and oppose the tenseless theory of time as the only credible alternative to such a picture. However, nothing could be farther from the truth, if for no other reason than that this view treats time as an unchanging, fixed backdrop against which or in relation to which events gain and lose temporal properties or status, and thus presupposes a version of Eternalism about time from the very first. The truth, I think, is this: If Presentism is true, *the present is all the time there is and all time is present time*. Time is the realm of things, all the things that exist, along with all their properties, changes, and states-of-affairs in which they may be involved. It begins with the first thing to come into being and comes to an end when the last thing ceases to exist. The physical universe, considered simply as an aggregate consisting of all the material things, events, and states-of-affairs that have ever existed has existed for, say, 13 to 20 billion years. On a Presentist construal of this, a thing exists in time and thus belongs the present for as long as it exists, even as it undergoes change, e.g. gaining and losing properties, aging, and belonging as an element or component to various states-of-affairs that come and go in time. Things, events, and states-of-affairs that exist for a while and then go out of existence become part of the past, even if their components go on existing. Things previously non-existent that come into being also enter into time when they first begin to exist. Their coming into existence is not a matter of their making a transition from the future to the present but rather having been brought into being as the result of the operation of uninterrupted prior causes. In this sense, then, we can say that the *extent* of the present is coterminous with the whole period of time through which anything that has existed that still exists at the present moment, which (on the supposition that matter has existed continuously since the beginning of time) bids fair to be coextensive with that of the existence of the entire physical universe itself, even though not inclusive of every event, thing or state-of-affairs that has existed during that whole period at any given moment. In particular, it does not include those things, events, or states-of-affairs that have existed but no longer do so: these belong to the inaccessible and unalterable past.

On this view, the past exists only as an object of thought and simply consists of all the things, events, and states-of-affairs that have existed but, having ceased to exist, do so no longer. This includes all those material things that have ceased to exist, as well as all their properties. In addition, many events and states-of-affairs (e.g. the sinking of the Bismarck, my having naturally blonde hair, etc.) also belong to the past. In many cases, properties, events, and states-of-affairs that have ceased to exist were the properties of things that still exist and had such things as their elements or components but do so no longer. Thus, my once having worn a coonskin cap, being present at the celebration of Alaskan statehood, and being part of the faculty of Shoreline College constitute a property, an event, and a state-of-affairs respectively that belong to the past – in this case, my past – the past of someone who (thank God!) at this writing still exists. It would be an error, however, to suppose that these past states of myself exist (as we say) in the past in such a way that I also somehow exist in the past. I exist in the present, and can only exist in the present. Nothing in the past exists, so nothing exists in the past. To suppose this is to conceive of the past as a curious realm where no longer existent things continue to exist in some shadowy fashion. Nor, as I have argued elsewhere, does some part of me belong to the past or exist there, since there are no temporal parts.[[15]](#footnote-15)

The past and the present, then, are not globally related as “before” and “after.” Instead, their relation is more complex and overlapping. Some things that exist now existed in the past (when that past was the present) and have existed continuously through that time up to the present moment and so belong to the present. Even so, those things have changed in various ways and no longer are what they were then, so that while the things still exist these properties, events, and states-of-affairs that were formerly possessed by those things, through which they lived, and concerning which they were once a part no longer exist and thus belong to the past. At the same time, even some properties, events, and states-of-affairs of long standing have persisted or endured from the past into the present and so have existed for that entire period of time up to the present moment, and thus belong to the present, not the past. Reference to or construction of an historical or biographical narrative, integrates both past and present into a single series of events and states-of-affairs happening to things, some of which exist and others of which are no longer existent, without regard to that fact.

Even so, those things that belong to the past did exist at an earlier (at that point present) moment of time, and occurred or elapsed in a determinate order. Given the anisotropy of time, this series is beyond being altered and the relational properties we attribute to no longer existing things (such as Napoleon’s being admired by Fred in 2014) be understood not as a non-existent thing acquiring a new property – since non-existent things have no properties – but instead in terms of changes occurring in things that exist now (such as Fred’s acquiring the property of admiring Napoleon in 2014.)[[16]](#footnote-16) As such, there is only one past, i.e. one series of past events and states-of-affairs related to the present moment as its temporal antecedents. Further, since the past no longer exists to be accessed, we have no means of access to the past as such.[[17]](#footnote-17)

Instead, we must reconstruct the past as a continuous narrative of prior events from what is presently available to us – memories, chronicles, monuments, pictures, photographs and other media, and so on in relation to what has existed through time and still exists now. Due to this limitation, many factual questions (e.g. “Was there a Native American standing where I am standing now one hundred and fifty years ago?”) are simply incapable of being answered despite the fact that we know what would have to be the case if that claim were so, because we have no access to the facts that we would have to know in order to decide this question one way or another. There are no gaps in the past; if there were, there would be no present, since every observable thing, event, or state-of-affairs that exists, occurs, or obtains at the present moment is metaphysically contingent and thus needed a pre-existent cause or set of conditions for its present existence, occurrence, or obtaining to be realized or actualized. Nevertheless, there are gaps in our knowledge of the past and this appears irremediable, even in principle, in many cases.

Similar considerations (*mutatis mutandis*) apply to the future. The future exists only as an object of thought and/or anticipation for us. As such, any properties that we wish to attribute to future things, events, or states-of-affairs have to be explained, not passively as properties possessed by non-existent things (etc.) but rather by reference to currently existing things (etc.) and their properties. Whereas we can freely imagine whatever we like in relation to the past, at the same time we know that there is only one past, to be reconstructed from memory and currently available evidence which can serve as the basis for reasonable conjecture about what actually happened in the past (i.e. when that past was the present). Whatever we can imagine having happened in the past, unless it actually did happen at some past moment when that moment was the present moment, it never did, cannot now happen at that moment, and in most cases is now excluded from ever happening even if at some time in the past its happening was a genuine metaphysical possibility. By contrast, the future seems wide open – the only things, events, or states-of-affairs that are ruled out as potentially happening in the future are those that are logically or metaphysically impossible. Of course, there will only be one actual future course of events. However, what that future course of events (at least on the non-deterministic account of causation I endorse) will be has not yet been determined.[[18]](#footnote-18) Rather, given the present state of the world, there are an indefinite number of casually possible projectable futures, each one of which could turn out to be the actual future. Of course, some future events are more than merely projectable but instead are properly called predictable, since given the current state of the world, the causal processes sufficient to bring about that event are already in play and no natural agency or process currently in operation can intervene to prevent that event as their outcome. (If I have just driven my car off a thousand-foot cliff, only a miracle can save me.) However, the number of these events impinging on the course of human existence is vanishingly small. We each of us, thinking globally and acting locally, have a good deal to say about what the actual future will be and even more influence over what our own actual futures will be. The openness of the future gives the lie to the claims made by determinists and fatalists who see the future, like the past, already set in stone. At the same time, many metaphysically possible future events will be prevented from occurring and these, becoming no longer metaphysically possible, will like past events become incapable of realization even prior to the time they were projected to occur.

A further consequence of this view is that, while every statement about the past is either true or false, only statements about events predictable from the present state of the world (as explained above) are true in the present moment. Statements about what events are projectable from the present state of the world are also true now, as are statements about what events are already prevented from ever being part of the future, e.g., “My twin brother will marry next year,” which is excluded by the fact that I have no twin brother. Other than this, statements about what will happen in the future are neither true nor false at the present time. As such, if there are tenselessly true propositions about the future, they will be true in that fashion in virtue of their relation to the future events that will make the corresponding tensed statements true in real time when that future time becomes present in preference to that which exists now, just as statements about the past and the present are.

Their being eternally true must not be confused with their being eternally true in a temporal sense in which “eternal” means “true at all times (or at every time).” If Presentism is true, only logically necessary propositions (“true in all possible worlds”) are true in this sense. “2+2=4” is true at all times; the tenseless proposition corresponding to the tensed statement that will be true if I mow my lawn tomorrow is not. Eternally true propositions, then, will have their truth-values in a manner indifferent to time, just as statements about the past and present do, as is appropriate to abstract objects existing outside of time. They are thus timelessly true in a manner indifferent to temporal passage, i.e. true without being true or becoming true at any moment of occurrent, elapsed time in the actual world. In such case, then, it is a category mistake to speak of such propositions as changing their truth value, becoming true or false, or (as Ockham does) having been already true at some time in the past. The same confusion underlies the (admittedly) hard-to-shake conviction that if a proposition is true, but not true *now*, that it must somehow become true *later*. Eternally true propositions don’t exist *now*, or at any time, let alone at some earlier no-longer-existent or later not-yet-existent time; they exist wholly outside of time in a way that makes the question “When do such propositions become true?” otiose.

More than this, being abstract objects, such propositions lack causal powers, and thus have no role to play in explaining the existence, occurrence, or obtaining of what they are true about. Rather, the explanatory relation goes in the opposite direction, so that the truth of such propositions is to be explained in terms of the existence, occurrence, or obtaining of the facts they report. Thus, while not true at any actually occurrent, elapsing moment of time in the actual world, they are nevertheless made true by some particular thing, event, or state-of-affairs that does exist, occur, or obtain at some actually occurring, elapsing moment of time in the actual world. To suppose otherwise is to attribute to abstract objects (tenselessly true propositions) properties that properly belong only to the concrete things, events, and states-of-affairs to which they correspond.

It remains that tensed statements about the future made at a particular point in time prior to the realization of the events that serve as their truth-conditions will lack truth-values at that time and will only acquire a truth-value when the facts that determinate their truth or falsity have been realized in the course of elapsed time. As such, tensed statements do in fact become true at an actually occurrent, elapsed moment in time, prior to which they lack a determinate truth value. However, to suppose that the same must hold for the corresponding tenselessly true propositions, which neither exist in nor are even relevantly related at any actually occurrent, elapsing moment of time at which they might be uttered except by relations of correspondence, does not obviously follow. Again, eternal, tenseless propositions do not exist in time and so are not true at any time; thus, unlike tensed statements their truth-value cannot change in relation to time. Therefore, despite the fact that every tenselessly true proposition is true, whether of past, present, or future, in virtue of some fact that comes to be only at some moment in the course of actually occurrent, elapsing time in the actual world yet, being non-temporally eternal, cannot become true at any actually occurrent, elapsing time in the actual world or have different truth values at different times in that world, because conceiving of that world as a concrete order of events, they do not exist in that world. For the same reason, neither can they be false or of indeterminate truth-value prior to the time at which the facts that makes that proposition true or false are realized in actuality. For this reason, my preference is to deny that there are any such propositions existing in fact, even as abstract objects, hence as anything other than as philosophical fictions useful for certain purposes but having no ontological import. They are merely a *facon de parler* we can use to represent events and states-of-affairs from the objective, third-person point of view and so suffer from that point of view’s inherent limitations.[[19]](#footnote-19)

1. See my “In Defense of Temporal Passage: Notes toward a Theory of Time,” also on this website. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Op. cit., 15-18. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid., 3-10. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Rex Warner, New York, Mentor-Omega Books, 1963, XI.15, 268-269. See also the entire passage of Book XI, 266-271. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. This, in turn, is a consequence of confusing the experience of duration (which is possible apart from the experience of space and its contents) with that of temporal passage, which is inseparable from the experience of objects, events, and states-of-affairs as temporally successive in lived experience. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. This view seem consonant with the account of the present suggested by D. H. Mellor, *Real Time II*, London, Routledge, 1998, 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Oddly, it appears that we have no name for this feature of consciousness; neither do I, though one is clearly needed. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See my “In Defense of Temporal Passage,” also on this website, for another, slightly different rendition of this argument. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See A. O. Lovejoy, *The Revolt Against Dualism*, Chicago, IL, Open Court Publishing, 1930, 23-25 and 75-96. This is the famous “Time-Lag” argument. For an opposing view, see Frank B. Ebersole, “How Philosophers See Stars,” in Jerry H. Gill, ed., *Philosophy Today, No. 2*, New York, MacMillan, 1969, 25-51. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. e.g., D. H. Mellor, op. cit., 16. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. This, it seems, was McTaggart’s view – see *The Nature of Existence*, Vol. II, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1927, 27-31. See also my paper, “The Doctrine of Temporal Parts II,” forthcoming on this website. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. A misuse of the notion “event horizon” – which actually refers to the limit of a “singularity” or black hole given in terms of the escape velocity of light – treats that notion as though it were a kind of temporal horizon line across which future events proceed from the future into the present. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Perhaps this is part of the point being made by O. K. Bouwsma in his intriguing but difficult essay, “The Mystery of Time (or, the Man who did not know what Time is),” in Bouwsma, *Philosophical Studies*, Lincoln, Nebraska, University of Nebraska Press, 1969, 99-127. (Originally published by Cornell University Press in 1942.) [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. For amplification of this claim, see my “The Doctrine of Temporal Parts – Part II,” also on this website. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. See my series, “The Doctrine of Temporal Parts,” especially Part I, forthcoming on this website. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. As I have argued elsewhere, in “A Defense of Temporal Passage.” Note the difference between the active and passive voices here. This is an application of a point made by Augustine in explaining how God can remain immutable and impassible despite having a changing series of relational properties: see *De Trinitate*, trans. Steven McKenna, CSSR, Washington, DC, Catholic University of America Press, V.17, 195-198. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. In the same vein, this offers a quick explanation for the physical impossibility of time travel, if what we mean by that is travel into our past, i.e. the past of this universe which includes my past, namely, the past does not exist and thus cannot be travelled to, even in principle. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. As I argue in my papers, “Non-Deterministic Causation and the Future,” also on this website and “Time and Cause,” forthcoming on this website. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. See my paper, “The Myth of the Intentional Stance and the Limits of the Third-Person Point of View,” in preparation. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)