

# Time and Existence

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Much debate in contemporary metaphysics of time has centred on whether or not tense is essential to the understanding of a temporal reality. The rival positions in this debate are associated with two very different pictures of the relationship between time and existence. Those who argue for the dispensability of tense see the phenomenon of tense as an epistemological accretion which infects our perception of the world but is in no way essential to a complete description of reality. With respect to existence, things past and future are supposed to be on an equal footing with things present. Thus the Quinean 'time slice' ontology, which sees the world as a four-dimensional entity in space-time, repudiates any ontological significance to the differences between past, present and future.<sup>1</sup> For the Quinean, what differences we see between past, present and future existents pertain to our limited mode of access to reality. In a perception which grasped the world as it really is tense differences would have no place. In this respect the Quinean position resembles Spinoza's claim in the *Ethics* that in so far as the mind conceives a thing under the dictates of reason it is affected equally, whether the idea be of a thing future, past or present.<sup>2</sup>

Serious commitment to tense, in contrast, carries with it the suggestion of a difference between the existence of things present and that of things past or future. This way of thinking about tense is defended in the work of Prior and Dummett.<sup>3</sup> Tense differences, on such a view, do not pertain merely to our mode of perception of a temporal reality. They are intrinsic to its very being. On this picture the reality of time is such that it can only be grasped with tense; that is, from within time. It is a picture of time which takes seriously the fact that temporal observers are themselves immersed in time. We cannot, on this view, coherently frame any description of the world as it would appear to an observer who was not in time. We can only describe it as it is; that is, as it is now. There is no question of standing, even in thought, outside the flux of time and describing it

<sup>1</sup> *Word and Object*, §36.

<sup>2</sup> *Ethics*, Part IV, Prop. lxii.

<sup>3</sup> See especially A. N. Prior, *Time and Modality* (Oxford, 1968), 26–36; *Papers on Time and Tense* (Oxford, 1968), Papers VII and VIII; *Past, Present and Future* (Oxford, 1968), Ch. 8. M. Dummett, 'A Defence of McTaggart's Proof of the Unreality of Time', *Philosophical Review* 69 (1960); 'The Reality of the Past', *P.A.S.* LXIX (1968–69); *Frege: Philosophy of Language* (Duckworth, 1973), Ch. 11.

all without the intrusion of a temporal perspective. If there were a 'God's eye view' of a temporal reality, it could only be because God is himself in time.

What is at issue here is not the possibility of constructing tenseless versions of tensed utterances but rather how to construe the relationship between these tenseless paraphrases and our ordinary tensed discourse. On the one view of time, tenseless paraphrases are seen as laying bare an underlying tenseless reality. On the other, tenseless discourse is seen as a secondary construction derivative from tense, convenient for some purposes, but with no claim to be a complete description of reality.

It is very difficult for proponents of these two pictures of time and existence to engage in worthwhile argument. The defender of tense can, for example, point to difficulties for the Quinean in capturing what we express in tensed discourse when we say that something has begun or ceased to exist. Saying such things does seem to demand accepting differences between the existence of present, past and future individuals. But since the Quinean sees it as a positive advantage of his system that it does not involve any complicated existential distinctions between objects of reference, this is unlikely to bother him. In speaking of things beginning and ceasing to exist, he may say, we are expressing only our confused experience of a temporal reality. His suggested translations, he may admit, perhaps fail to capture all we have in mind when we talk about temporal objects, but they capture all that is worth preserving. It is no concern of his to lay bare the content of our judgments that things have begun or ceased to exist. For beginning and ceasing to exist are no part of the reality we attempt to know. They belong rather to the distortions of our confused modes of access to reality. His tenseless paraphrases present reality as it might be seen 'under the dictates of reason'. Here the defender emerges as a latter day rationalist.

It may well appear to be an advantage of the Quinean system that it bypasses the need to articulate any supposed contrasts between past, present and future with respect to existence. But such a system will of course not satisfy anyone who is already convinced that these contrasts are essential to the understanding of a temporal reality. The onus, however, seems to be on the defender of tense to provide a coherent account of the differences between temporal objects which he is committed to treating as intrinsic to a rational understanding of reality. Here I want to examine ways in which the contrasts between the existence of past, present and future individuals might be articulated within a tensed framework.

## **Two 'Senses' of 'Exists'**

There seems to be a marked difference between the ways in which spatial and temporal concepts operate with respect to existence. This difference

can be seen in the fact that there is an appearance of ambiguity in the term 'exists' in its relation to time which does not obtain in its relation to space. We feel no reservations about saying that spatially distant objects 'exist' in exactly the same sense as that in which spatially present objects are said to exist. The most straightforward looking way of distinguishing between the existence of things present and that of things past and future is simply to maintain that there are two distinct senses of 'exists'. This is the line taken by Geach in his paper, 'Form and Existence'.<sup>4</sup> According to Geach there are two distinct senses of the verb 'to be'. One amounts to the tenseless use of 'is' associated with the existential quantifier, carrying no commitment to the present existence of the thing said to be; the other is a tensed predicative use of 'exists' which holds of temporal objects for the duration of their temporal existence but not at other times. It is in this sense that things are said to begin and to cease to exist. But are there in fact two different 'senses' of 'exists' here? Is it a genuine ambiguity?

Dummett argues against Geach's distinction. If the doctrine as advanced by Geach were correct, he says, the verb 'exists' would be simply equivocal:

... after all, what difference of sense could be greater than one involving a difference of logical type, that between a quantifier and a first-level predicate? This is enough to show that the doctrine, as stated, cannot be correct: for even if there are two distinguishable senses of 'exists', these senses are evidently connected.<sup>5</sup>

The error here may be recognized, he thinks, by asking whether 'Cleopatra no longer exists' says that Cleopatra *no longer* has a certain property:

There is as much absurdity in saying that there is such a person as Cleopatra, who no longer has the property of existing, as in saying that there is such a substance as phlogiston, which lacks the (timeless) property of existing. Beauty is a property which Cleopatra had when a woman, and may have lacked as a baby: but existence, even when temporal, is not a property that may be first acquired and later lost.<sup>6</sup>

It is tempting to reply to this that the appearance of absurdity arises only from not employing a tenseless use of 'exists' in introducing Cleopatra as a subject for predication. But what Dummett is suggesting here is that no use of 'exists' which is genuinely tenseless should be allowed application to temporal objects; to things, that is, which undergo change and which begin and cease to exist. He is resisting the treatment of such a use as reflecting an underlying tenseless structure in which all existents

<sup>4</sup> P. T. Geach, 'Form and Existence', *P.A.S.* 55 (1954-55).

<sup>5</sup> M. Dummett, *Frege: Philosophy of Language* (Duckworth, 1973), 386.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 387.

are on an equal footing, with no distinction between the existence of things present and that of things past or future. Where temporal objects are involved, to say that there is such a thing itself ultimately involves tense. The supposed tenseless use of 'exists' here cannot be sharply separated from the tensed one. On this view there are no sempiternal subjects for predication, at any rate none that can be identified with things that begin and cease to exist. 'Tensed existence', it is being suggested, is somehow inextricably involved in the existential quantifier here; it is not just the content of a predicate.

Dummett says very little in *Frege* in support of this claim and what he does say seems unsatisfactory. To show that a closer connection obtains between the two uses of 'exists' than can be accommodated by Geach's distinction it is not sufficient to point out that temporal existence is not a property that can be acquired or lost.

Beginning to exist, clearly, is not the acquisition of such a property, or, indeed, of any property. That would be to construe beginning to exist as something that happens to a thing. Ceasing to exist can be more readily construed in terms of the loss of some property or properties. I will have more to say about this in a moment. But I do not think it was ever intended by Geach that there was a property, 'temporal existence', which is ascribed to a thing when it is said that it exists; or that ceasing to exist consisted in the loss of such a property. The property whose loss would involve ceasing to exist would be treated as varying according to what kind of thing it is. For Geach, in 'Form and Existence', this amounts to the question what the *form* of the thing is.

There are, none the less, some puzzling features of the supposed tensed use of 'exists' as a predicate. This use of 'exists', if a predicate, seems to be one that essentially demands modification. The modified forms 'did not exist', 'no longer exists', etc., seem the basic ones. To say that something has begun or has ceased to exist certainly seems to say something about it. But we do not gain understanding of what is said here by putting our concepts of beginning and ceasing together with an independent concept of a property and know from that what it is for something to begin or cease to exist. True, there is a content that can be provided for the present tensed form 'X exists', namely 'X is extant'. But to be extant is just to have begun to exist and not to have ceased to exist. There does seem to be something strange about a predicate whose content in the present tense form, normally basic to predication, derives solely from that of its modified forms. What seems right in the claim that there is a tensed predicative sense of 'exists' is that when we say of something that it has begun or has ceased to exist we are saying something about it. What is strange about it is the curious lack of content, the vacuousness of the present tensed form of this predicate, except where, as with 'extant', this can be spelled out in terms of the modified forms.

Another problem with this supposed 'predicative' sense of 'exists' is that it seems to put the period before a thing comes to exist on an equal footing with the period after it has ceased to exist. And this destroys what seems to be an important asymmetry between beginning and ceasing to exist.

When a thing ceases to exist it remains a subject for predication. Otherwise, as Wittgenstein pointed out, Mr N.N. could not significantly be said to be dead.<sup>7</sup> It could not be said of anything that it had ceased to exist. Hence it comes naturally to us to think of ceasing to exist in terms of the loss of a predicate rather than as the loss of a subject for predication. It is not natural though to think of beginning to exist in this way. Beginning to exist is not the acquisition of a predicate but the coming to be of a subject for predication. Here beginning to exist seems to have an absoluteness about it which is lacked by ceasing to exist. Once a temporal object has come to be, nothing can annihilate it in any way that would match the absoluteness of its coming to be. For the kind of annihilation which would match beginning to exist would involve bringing it about that there never had been such a thing. Whether we are immortal or not, nothing can do that to us. As a subject for predication, it seems that no temporal subject can be mortal.

This comparative absoluteness of beginning to exist is reflected in a kind of necessity which attaches to a thing's origins but not to the circumstances under which it ceases to exist. Death has a contingency with respect to which individuals we are which our beginning to exist lacks. Death can come to us in any number of ways and yet it be us that die. In contrast it has been argued, in particular by Kripke, that a thing could not have come to be from different origins and yet be the individual thing that it is.<sup>8</sup> The importance of this kind of necessity may have been overrated by Kripke.<sup>9</sup> But that it can be discerned at all reflects the asymmetry I am concerned to bring out between beginning and ceasing to exist.

This asymmetry between beginning and ceasing to exist is obscured by the introduction of a predicative sense of 'exists' as that in which it is said of something that it begins or ceases to exist. By invoking Geach's distinction we can indeed say that a thing has ceased to exist without our being deprived of a subject for predication. The existential quantifier 'sense' will still apply. There is something which has ceased to exist. But a temporal object's beginning to exist seems to demand the use of the first, supposedly untensed, 'sense'. Beginning to exist is not a matter of a predicate's becoming applicable, but of its coming to be the case that there is a subject for predication.

<sup>7</sup> *Philosophical Investigations* I, 40.

<sup>8</sup> 'Naming and Necessity', in Harman and Davidson (eds), *Semantics of Natural Language*, 312 ff.

<sup>9</sup> See Dummett, *op. cit.*, Appendix to Ch. 5.

Postulating a special 'present actuality' sense of 'exists' does have some plausibility as a way of expressing the contrast between present and past individuals. But Geach's predicative 'exists' cannot be said to be that sense in which things begin and cease to exist. Death can be presented as a loss of properties—if not of a property of present actuality, then at least of some properties which are essential to its being the kind of thing it is. Whether such an account would amount to an analysis of ceasing to exist is perhaps more dubious. It is from our understanding of ceasing to exist that we judge what properties are essential here. Perhaps there cannot be a general analysis of ceasing to exist, any more than there could be an analysis of what it is to win a game as such. Perhaps all that can be done is to set out what ceasing to exist comes to for each kind of thing. However that may be, to see something's beginning to exist in terms of the acquisition of predicates seems, in contrast, quite mistaken. It is not as if the thing did exist before, but without those properties—whatever they are—which are essential to the kind of thing it is.

If we try to think through what beginning to exist would have to be like for the difference between a future existent and a present one to be presented in terms of the applicability of a predicate, it becomes apparent that the claim that whatever exists exists now cannot be dismissed as a trivial equivocation which gains a specious plausibility from moving between two 'senses' of 'exists' which can and ought to be sharply separated. Beginning to exist would involve a predicate's coming to be true of a subject which predates that change. But then it must have existed before the predicative 'exists' came to be true of it. So its gaining that predicate does not constitute its beginning to be.

It might be claimed that this is too crude a reconstruction of what beginning to exist would have to be if the difference between future and present individuals were a matter of the applicability of a predicate. Too crude, because it suggests, unfairly, that what begins to be would have to be an individual which was already there prior to its beginning. But that would be to treat the subject of beginning-to-be as itself something which endures through time. But to allow that present actuality is a predicate, it might be said, it is not necessary to treat beginning to exist as something that happens to a temporal object. A thing's status as a temporal object can come about with its beginning to be.

But this seems even worse than the crude picture of individuals 'waiting to begin to be' with which we started. We now have beginning to exist as something that happens to *timeless* subjects. This is as if being a temporal object—being the kind of thing which endures through time—were a phase in the existence of a timeless subject. The picture here is rather like Leibniz's account of the relationship between souls and 'bare' monads, which posits a permanent pool of substances of which some attain to a phase of conscious perception before lapsing back into stupor.

But the relationship between timeless subjects and temporal objects cannot be like that. What kind of *phase* could being a temporal object be? Being a temporal object cannot be a phase of something timeless. What is really involved in the distinction between two supposed senses of 'exists' here is I think an unacceptable mixing of a tenseless framework with a tensed one. Once subjects for predication are treated as being on an equal footing with respect to existence they lose their status as temporal objects. No predicate can then be added to them to yield that status.

Something which may seem unfair about the picture of beginning to exist which I have set up here is that it treats it as something which happens to an individual. But, it might be said, the changes involved in a thing's coming to be do not have to be located in that thing. It is something that happens, but not something that happens to that which begins to be. It is true that Geach need not be committed to treating beginning to exist as something that happens to a thing. But he does have to maintain that it involves the acquisition of a predicate, something true of a thing during but not before its present actuality. And I think that is all that is necessary for my criticism to hold.

The desire to postulate two distinct senses of 'exists' springs, I am suggesting, from an uneasy shifting between two incompatible pictures of time. It seems to arise from shifting in thought from a position outside a temporal reality to one very much within it.

The underlying picture of time involved is one similar to that of McTaggart.<sup>10</sup> Subjects are stretched out in a tenseless series and differentiated from one another by temporal properties which some have and others lack. Treating temporal existence as a predicate of individuals is akin to McTaggart's treatment of 'present' as a predicate of events, about which I will have more to say in a moment. Introducing present actuality as the content of a predicate is then an unsuccessful attempt to bring the reality of time back into a tenseless framework. McTaggart was quite right in maintaining that we cannot both conceive of tense determinations as predicates holding of subjects timelessly existing in a tenseless framework and also accept the reality of time. Where he was wrong was in thinking that we must think of 'present' as a predicate. And the same goes for the supposed predicate 'temporal existence'.

It now begins to look as if any distinctions between the existence of past, present and future individuals must be looked for not in the applicability of predicates, but in their very status as subjects. This in fact is the position adopted by Prior in his treatment of time and existence. It is this approach that I want now to consider.

<sup>10</sup> J. McTaggart, *The Nature of Existence* (Cambridge, 1927).

### Differences Between Past, Present and Future Individuals *qua* Subjects

Prior, as might be expected from a philosopher who takes tense as seriously as he did, puts forward in several places a version of the thesis that there is a radical difference between the existence of things present and that of things past and future. His version of the thesis is one that is, at first sight, counter-intuitive. There are, he thinks, no facts about individuals that are not at present in existence. No facts about a thing can obtain before it exists or after it has ceased to exist.

Where 'X' stands for a proper name, 'X exists' (tensed) is, for Prior, logically equivalent to and definable as 'there are facts about X'. The rationale for this restriction of facts about individuals to facts about individuals at present in existence comes out in his treatment of the equivalent for tense of the Barcan formula:

If it is, has been, or will be the case that something  $\phi$ 's, then there is something which is  $\phi$ -ing, has  $\phi$ 'd or will  $\phi$ .<sup>11</sup>

Now in Quine's tenseless logic utterances which appear to assert something of changing truth value—something true at a time—are treated as really asserting that something is timelessly true of a time. For such a logic, Prior points out, the equivalent of the Barcan formula offers no problems:

... if there is a time of which it is timelessly true that something  $\phi$ 's at it, then quite unquestionably there is an object of which it is timelessly true that it  $\phi$ 's at some time. . . .<sup>12</sup>

For a tense logic, in contrast, the equivalent of the Barcan formula does pose problems:

For suppose that in fact someone will fly to the moon someday, but not anyone who now exists. Then it will be true that it either is, has been or will be the case that someone is flying to the moon, but it will not be true that there is someone who either is flying or has flown or will fly to the moon.<sup>13</sup>

It should be noted here again that we are not presented with a simple clash between the tense logician and the tenseless logician about whether or not a formula whose interpretation is not at issue is to be accepted. Each must adopt a different reading of the formula. Prior, we have seen, acknowledges that the formula is acceptable when construed in the way

<sup>11</sup> A. N. Prior, *Time and Modality* (Oxford, 1968), 29.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

appropriate to a tenseless logic. For thus construed neither its antecedent nor its consequent says anything at all about what in that system replaces the present existence of the thing which  $F$ 's at  $t$ .

Construed in the way appropriate for tense logic, Prior thinks, the Barcan formula is unacceptable because its acceptance demands the assumption that whatever exists at any time exists at all times. It demands, that is, the assumption that all real individuals are sempiternal; that there is a 'permanent pool of objects'. No such assumption is required for the acceptance of the formula when it is construed in the way appropriate to a tenseless logic. For, thus construed, its acceptance involves no commitment to anything that would serve as the surrogate in such a system of present existence in tense logic.

Prior's repudiation of 'comprehensive objecthood' is not directed merely against the crude picture of future individuals as waiting in the wings to make their appearance in the theatre of present actuality. The assumption of comprehensive objecthood is already there if we merely say that there are facts about future individuals. In this form Prior thinks the assumption that whatever exists at any time exists at all times is very difficult genuinely to dispense with. It comes very naturally to us in discussing the Barcan formula to say that the flight to the moon may be accomplished by someone who does not yet exist but will exist later on, which seems to imply that there is an  $X$  such that  $X$  does not exist yet but will exist later on.

Difficult to dispense with it may well appear. For it seems essential to allow facts about individuals to predate their coming to be if we are to be able even to say that they have begun to exist. A thing's beginning to be seems to demand that it be the subject of contrasting facts with respect to existence. There have to be times at which it does not yet exist—times at which it has not yet begun to be. How is this consistent with Prior's claim that before a thing comes to exist there are strictly no facts about it? If we do not allow facts about a thing to obtain before it exists, how are we to conceive of a thing's beginning to exist? But Prior thinks his claim that there can be no facts about an individual before its existence does not prevent his treating 'X did not exist' as expressing a fact about  $X$ .

'X did not exist', for Prior, says something about  $X$  which relates to a time before its existence. But what it expresses is a *present* fact. It is now true of  $X$  that it did not exist in the past. But there is no corresponding fact which obtained in the past of the form 'X does not exist', nor of any other form which would yield a fact about  $X$ . The present holding of a past-tensed truth does not necessitate the past holding of a then present-tensed truth:

... if someone says *truly* 'I did not exist at  $t_1$ ', the truth of this cannot consist in there having been a fact at  $t_1$ , which someone could have

expressed by then saying 'This does not exist', since that is *always* 'self-contradictory', i.e. it does not mean 'It was the case at  $t_1$ , that (I do not exist)'; it can only mean 'It was not the case at  $t_1$ , that (I exist)', i.e. it *now is not* the case that my existence was the case then—it is not that my *non-existence then was* the case.<sup>14</sup>

'Whereof one cannot speak', Prior remarks elsewhere, 'thereof one must be silent; but it does not follow that whereof one could not have spoken yesterday, thereof one must be silent today'.<sup>15</sup>

So once a thing exists we can, consistently with Prior's thesis, say significantly of it that it did not exist at an earlier time. Thus for Prior the passage of time can be seen as creating logical possibilities, including, in this limited way, logical possibilities for the past. There are now truths about a thing relating to times before it existed. But there are no corresponding present tensed statements true in the past of that thing.

The inaccessibility of future individuals is, for Prior, not just an epistemological matter. Strictly, there *are* no future individuals. We can predict that there will be a future individual, but we cannot say of a future individual that it will come to be. One might want to question Prior's insistence here that the contrast is not at all an epistemological matter. Perhaps the contrast could be more plausibly presented as hinging on a contrast between two very different kinds of epistemological consideration. The suggestion, which seems implicit in Prior's account, that even if the future existence of an individual could be predicted with absolute certainty, we would still not be able to say *of* a future individual that *it* would come to be, is certainly open to question. I am none the less, as my earlier remarks about the absoluteness of beginning to exist indicated, very much in sympathy with the spirit of Prior's distinction between present and future individuals. As a thesis about the contrast between past and present individuals, however, the 'no facts about non-existents' claim seems thoroughly implausible. It becomes less implausible (though still I think, not ultimately acceptable) if it is seen in the light of Prior's general treatment of tense. Prior's treatment of the temporal existence of individuals is analogous to, in fact in some respects just a particular application of, his account of the present as vacuous.

The theory of the vacuousness of the present—the 'no present' theory, as Prior sometimes calls it—is introduced by analogy with Ramsey's redundancy theory of truth.<sup>16</sup> 'He is eating his breakfast now' and 'He is eating his breakfast at present' say no more and no less than the plain 'He is eating his breakfast'. And, in construing this last sentence, we must not think of the present tense of the verb as being somehow extraneous to its

<sup>14</sup> A. N. Prior, *Past, Present and Future* (Oxford, 1968), 151.

<sup>15</sup> 'Thank Goodness That's Over', *Philosophy* 34 (1959), 17 n.

<sup>16</sup> See 'On Spurious Egocentricity' in *Papers on Time and Tense*.

assertive content. Indeed, Prior thinks, it is not a mere parallelism which holds between the vacuity theory of truth and the vacuity theory of the present. They are in a sense the same theory, in the sense that they merely assert the vacuity of one and the same phrase 'It is the case that', or 'It is true that', considered against different non-vacuous contrasting phrases 'It is false that—' and 'It was/will be the case that—'. But the phrase 'It is the case that—' does not have different senses in these two settings. It carries tense with it—the present tense—just as much when it is being contrasted with 'It is false that—' or 'It will be that—'.<sup>17</sup>

With such a theory of the present we do not need to treat 'present', 'past' and 'future' as predicates, nor to postulate some tenseless substratum as subject of such predicates. The concept of 'becoming', construed as a substitution of one such 'predicate' for another, which many have, with reason, found suspect, becomes superfluous for the understanding of time. The classical statement of the view that 'past', 'present' and 'future' are predicates is McTaggart's. According to McTaggart, the understanding of time necessarily involves the idea of an event's coming to be present. Without tense determinations we cannot have terms standing in genuinely temporal relations. 'Past', 'present' and 'future' are, for McTaggart, incompatible predicates which must apply to every event if time is to be real. Hence his thesis of the unreality of time.

On the Prior picture of time, the present comes in not as a predicate which events have at one time and lack at others but as a temporal perspective from which all our utterances are made. It is not a separable part of the content of present tensed utterances; indeed not an ingredient that could be isolated from our tensed utterances at all. This is a picture of time which, as I remarked before, makes the reality of time very much a matter of how it is grasped from within by observers who are themselves temporal.

'Past', 'present' and 'future' are for Prior pseudo-predicates, always replaceable by the use of ordinary tensed verbs. These tensed sentences are properly construed as adverbial in form. Past and future tensings are sentential operators rather than covert predicates of an event referred to in the sentence. Putting a verb into the past or future tense is exactly the same sort of thing as adding an adverb to the sentence. 'I was having my breakfast' is related to 'I am having my breakfast' in exactly the same way as 'I am allegedly having my breakfast' is related to it. They modify the whole utterance. The thesis that there are no facts about non-existent individuals is best understood in the light of this theory of the present. 'Present actuality' can be seen as just the unmodified content of the verb 'to be'. The time span of presentness here is precisely the time span of the object. Thus the present tensed 'exists' is vacuous. 'But X did not exist',

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 20–22.

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'X will not exist', etc., do say something about X, just as past or future tensed statements in general say something about whatever is the subject of an unmodified present tensed statement.

Once an individual has begun to exist, we can project facts about it into the distant past when it did not exist and into the distant future, when it may not exist. Past and future alike are hence qualifications on the unqualified present being of the individual. But we cannot project from a future individual. Hence we cannot say now that future individuals do not exist, though, once they do exist, we will be able to say that they did not exist at the time at which we are now talking. In the same way, Prior thinks, we cannot project forward to the present from a past individual, though we could have said while it did exist that it would not exist at the time at which we are now talking. Prior's account is in this respect like Geach's: it rejects any asymmetry between the non-existence of past individuals and that of future individuals. But the thesis is counter-intuitive with respect to past individuals. Nameability, for Prior, not only begins with the individual, it also ceases with it. The existence of an individual seems, in C. S. Peirce's terms, to 'burst the fluidity of the general',<sup>18</sup> only to erupt back into inchoate generality as a past existent. Prior himself expresses misgivings about this aspect of his treatment of time and existence. 'The dead', after all, are 'metaphysically less frightening than the unborn'.<sup>19</sup>

Prior's formulations of the 'no facts about non-existents' thesis often show the intrusion of his attraction for the doctrine of Russellian names—the idea that the subject must be given, must actually be there, existent, if what we say is really about it. This is one reason why the thesis is expressed as applying to past individuals as well as future ones, although the argumentation underlying the thesis always hinges on consideration of future individuals. But if the demands of Russellian names were followed through it might be expected that the class of acceptable facts would be narrowed down to those relating to the psychologically present, as was the case with Russell's own position, so that we could make genuinely specific assertions only about what was immediately present to consciousness. Pushed to its limits, the Russellian doctrine would lead to the restriction of the class of specific facts to what is apprehended in a 'specious present'. And to an understanding of the relationship between time and existence akin to that of Augustine—a thesis of the non-existence of what lies beyond the bounds of the specious present.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>18</sup> C. S. Peirce, *Collected Papers* 4, 172.

<sup>19</sup> *Past, Present and Future*, 171.

<sup>20</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, Book XI.

## Conclusion

I do not want to defend the Russellian epistemology with which Prior gives content to the thesis that there are no facts about past individuals. But the thesis is not, I think, advanced just because of an extraneous intrusion of a hankering after Russellian names. Prior does want to challenge the asymmetry I have appealed to throughout this paper between past and future individuals, and to challenge it not by extending to future individuals the specificity common sense gives to past individuals but in the other direction, by depriving past individuals of their specificity. The belief in 'immortal subjects', I think he wants to suggest, is a superstition. To take tense seriously, to see time from within, does involve conceding that we cannot say of Mr N.N. even that he is dead. Mr N.N. cannot, for Prior, be said to be dead. Death does not merely deprive Mr N.N. of present actuality while leaving him, *qua* subject, intact. It deprives us not just of his company. Being dead, he is altogether absent from the order of things, just as he was before he came to be. We can give past subjects equal status *qua* subjects with present ones, Prior insists, only by denying that they cease to exist. If we allow that there are facts about future or past individuals, we must deny that they come into being and pass away.

Such a denial is not difficult to accommodate in a system like Spinoza's, at any rate with respect to past individuals. Things past can be seen as 'affecting us equally' with things present because all are alike modifications of being. Past individuals lack none of the fullness of being of present individuals. All they lack is continued impingement on our senses. But this is something which can be dismissed as of no consequence by a mind attempting to transcend its limitations to a sensory context, and to grasp truth in a way that prescind from its own position in the totality of things. What has been the case, to such a mind, will be every bit as important as what is the case. Where individuals are construed as modifications of being, rather than as substances in their own right, it is less suspect to concede past individuals equal reality with present ones. Prior's point is that if we are not prepared to make that assimilation—if we do want to retain a world in which individual substances come to be and perish, rather than one in which modifications successively hold of being—then we have to give up the 'superstition' of immortal subjecthood.

There is however a middle way which I think can be extracted from the adverbial treatment of tense. Without going all the way with Spinoza—making the existence of individuals just a matter of successive modifications of being—we can, in the light of Prior's treatment of tense, construe the past existence of an individual on the model of the past tensing of a proposition. The vacuousness of the present and the rejection of facts about what does not now exist are parallel theses. And the second, I suggested earlier, can be seen as in some ways a special case of the first.

## Genevieve Lloyd

This amounts to a reversal of the way the relationship between tense and the existence of individuals has been seen since McTaggart. McTaggart sees tense as a special case of predication. Tense is construed as an event acquiring and losing properties—presentness, pastness, futurity. The adverbial treatment of tense breaks the grip of this predicative model. Tense is seen not as another property which can be forced, however uncomfortably, into the subject–predicate mould. Tense does not concern what is true of a thing. It concerns *when* things are thus and so. Pastness is a qualified affirmation. It does not affirm some additional property of pastness. The existence of a past individual, I suggest, can be seen as a limiting case of the past tensing of truths relating to it. Saying the existence of an individual is past is like putting a generalized past tense operator before all statements we wish to make of it. But this does not, as Prior's preoccupation with Russellian names led him to think, take it beyond reality, remove it altogether from the order of things, any more than an ordinary past tense operator deprives an utterance of assertive force. Tense operators resemble negation. But they need not be treated as *kinds* of negation. That was the way Augustine saw tense—'The past is unreal, for it has already been, the future is not for it has yet to be'. But we need not see it that way.

Spinoza sees the difference between past and present individuals as a mere lack of impingement of past individuals on the senses. On a Russellian epistemology, of course, that would constitute a radical difference. But we can shed that aspect of Prior's treatment of tense. Past and present individuals, we can then say, differ with respect to being, but only as a limiting case of the difference between past tensed and present tensed affirmations. This would amount to allowing a *kind of sub specie aeternitatis* perception to be reconcilable with taking tense seriously. It would however be one from a temporal perspective, looking back on the past. There would remain an asymmetry between future and past individuals, between beginning and ceasing to exist.

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