Abstract

The aim of this essay is to characterize the issue whether tense is real. Roughly, this is the issue whether, given any tensed representation, its tense corresponds in some suitably direct way to some feature of reality. The task is to make this less rough. Eight characterizations of the issue are considered and rejected, before one is endorsed. On this characterization, the unreality of tense is equivalent to the unity of temporal reality. The issue whether tense is real, so characterized, is then related to Kant’s deduction of the categories in his *Critique of Pure Reason*. It is argued that Kant’s deduction does not provide the argument for the unreality of tense that it may appear to. The conclusion drawn at the end of the essay is that the unreality of tense cannot be argued for—not because tense is real, but because, even if it is unreal, its unreality is basic.

Keywords

Critique of Pure Reason, deduction of the categories, Kant, reality, representation, temporal, tense, unity

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Apperception and the Unreality of Tense

My concern is with the issue whether tense is real. Broadly speaking, what this means is that I shall be investigating the *metaphysics* of tensed thought and talk. The sort of question on which I hope to cast light is this: can one and the same fact account both for the truth of a memory I have today, about how things were yesterday, and for the truth of a thought that I had yesterday, about how things were then?

Eventually I shall be concerned with how such questions relate to various aspects of what Kant calls ‘the deduction of the categories’ in his *Critique of Pure Reason*.[[1]](#footnote-1)1 More specifically, I hope to see how the answers to such questions might depend on the answers to questions about (to use Kant’s phrase) the unity of apperception.[[2]](#footnote-2)2

I begin with three disclaimers. First, although I talk about ‘the’ issue whether tense is real, and shall continue to do so throughout the essay, this is in full acknowledgement of the fact that I am discussing just one of many issues that could reasonably be referred to in this way. All sorts of debates have been conducted under this title. I make no pretence to be focusing on any one thing that has been in dispute in every case.[[3]](#footnote-3)3

Secondly, I am not so much interested in settling this issue as in characterizing it. This means that, granted the first disclaimer, I must beware that what I characterize is worthy of attention. In particular, I must try to respect what I shall call the Interest Constraint: to characterize the issue in such a way that neither the view that tense is real nor the view that tense is unreal is a straw man, in the sense of being easily refuted or completely without appeal.[[4]](#footnote-4)4

The third disclaimer is that I shall not be doing any serious Kantian exegesis. Most of the claims that I shall make about Kant’s deduction will, I regret, be unsubstantiated. But those who dispute my attributions might still find something of interest in the relationship between the issue on which I shall eventually fasten and the ideas that I shall claim to find in Kant.

Now I have said that there is more than one issue that could reasonably be called ‘the’ issue whether tense is real. Various points of controversy cluster together here, and they need to be distinguished. But they are not always distinguished. As a result, many of the debates that have been called debates about whether tense is real are little more than a tissue of confusion and failure of communication, so that some philosophers have reacted with scepticism—perfectly justified scepticism—about whether anything at all merits the label. To show that I take such scepticism seriously, I shall devote the first section of this essay to highlighting some of the issues that could *not* reasonably be what is meant by the issue whether tense is real, at least not granted the Interest Constraint, though they look at first blush as though they could.[[5]](#footnote-5)5

**1. Eight issues that could not reasonably be what is meant by the issue whether tense is real**

Tense is a feature of certain representations. That is, loosely, it is a feature of certain beliefs, judgements, thoughts, claims, and assertions.[[6]](#footnote-6)6 It is that feature which indicates that they are from a temporal point of view. Thus if I say, ‘It was humid yesterday’, both the grammatical form of the verb I use and my use of the word ‘yesterday’ are part of the tense of the representation I produce. Now very roughly, the issue whether tense is real—*any* issue that could reasonably be referred to in that way—turns on whether this feature of representations corresponds in some suitably direct way to a feature of what is represented. The task at hand is to make this less rough.

*First suggestion*: The issue whether tense is real is the issue whether the truth conditions of a tensed representation (a representation from a temporal point of view) can be given by means of a representation that is itself tensed.[[7]](#footnote-7)7

In due course I shall argue that the issue is a variation on this theme. But as it stands this suggestion is clearly wrong. It makes the view that tense is unreal a straw man, in violation of the Interest Constraint. For patently the truth conditions of a tensed representation can be given by means of a representation that is itself tensed. If I say, today, ‘It was humid yesterday’, then what I say is true if and only if it was humid yesterday.

*Second suggestion*: The issue whether tense is real is the issue whether it can be of material significance whether an event has occurred, is occurring, or is yet to occur.

That will not do either. That, too, makes the view that tense is unreal a straw man. Of course it can be of material significance whether an event has occurred, is occurring, or is yet to occur. My attitude to an excruciating pain that I recall feeling yesterday is very different from my attitude to that same pain two days ago, while I was still anticipating it. But it remains to be shown that *what* is of significance here is something that directly answers to the tense of my various representations of the pain, and not just the tense of the representations themselves.[[8]](#footnote-8)8

*Third suggestion*: The issue whether tense is real is the issue whether properties such as being in the past and being in the future are properties that events have ‘intrinsically’ (that is, not from any temporal point of view).

The problem with this suggestion is that it is likely to make the opposite view, the view that tense is real, a straw man, again in violation of the Interest Constraint. I say ‘it is likely to’, rather than ‘it will’, because there is *a* way of construing the claim that events have these properties ‘intrinsically’ whereby (pending various metaphysical concerns about whether an event can still have a property even when evidence for its having that property is lost, or concerns about whether the future is open[[9]](#footnote-9)9) it is fair to say that they do.[[10]](#footnote-10)10 For instance, I take it to be a simple fact that the first moon landing has already taken place. I do not say that the first moon landing has already taken place *from this temporal point of view*, as though it might not have already taken place from some other temporal point of view, any more than I say that I am English *from my point of view*, as though I might not be English from yours (cf. Lowe ([1987](#B193)) and Lowe ([1992](#B194))). But still, when I say, ‘The first moon landing has already taken place’, I am producing a representation from a particular temporal point of view. This is illustrated by the fact that somebody could once have used the sentence ‘The first moon landing has already taken place’ to say something false (just as a German could use the sentence ‘I am English’ to say something false). The straw man is the view that the first moon landing has the property of having already taken place, construed in such a way that *any* utterance of the sentence ‘The first moon landing has already taken place’ would have succeeded, or would still succeed, in ascribing that property to it. For insofar as the first moon landing has any such property, then it equally has the property (similarly construed) of being yet to take place; and insofar as there is any making sense of either of these properties, then no event can have them both.[[11]](#footnote-11)11 A defender of this view might try to escape this contradiction by saying that the properties in question have been underspecified; that what are really at stake are such properties as having already taken place *now* and (what is quite compatible with that) being yet to take place *in the past*. But the response to this is familiar. If this is meant as a defence of the view on anything like the lines originally envisaged, then the original objections can themselves be reformulated: insofar as the first moon landing has the property of having already taken place now, then it equally has the property of being yet to take place *now* (cf. McTaggart ([1993](#B212)), pp. 32–33).

*Fourth suggestion*: The issue whether tense is real is the issue whether two tensed representations of the same type but from different temporal points of view (for instance, two utterances on successive days of the sentence ‘It was humid yesterday’[[12]](#footnote-12)12) have, modulo any other indexical features they share,[[13]](#footnote-13)13 the same content.

The problem with this is that there is not really an *issue* here. In one sense the two representations have the same content. In another sense they do not. Nothing of substance hangs on which sense we choose to adopt.[[14]](#footnote-14)14

*Fifth suggestion*: The issue whether tense is real is the issue whether physics needs to involve tensed representations.

I am probably more sympathetic than most to the idea that physics plays a unique and privileged role in informing our conception of reality. Indeed I am prepared to say that the only facts there are physical facts, facts about how things are physically (see further Moore ([1997](#B224)), pp. 75–76). But even if this much is granted, this fifth suggestion fails. For consider: physics does not need to involve representations that are explicitly about dogs. Yet not even the most strident physicalism can combine with that to yield the conclusion that dogs are unreal.

*Sixth suggestion*: The issue whether tense is real is the issue whether, if there had never been any tensed representations (say, because there had never been any creatures capable of producing them), events would still have had such properties as being in the past and being in the future.

There is *an* issue here, certainly. But it does not seem to me to be a good candidate for the issue whether tense is real. Someone who denies the reality of tense can quite reasonably accept that, had things turned out in such a way that no creatures capable of producing tensed representations had ever existed, the Big Bang, say, would still have occurred some fifteen thousand million years ago. There is no reason why we should not use tensed representations to describe a world without tensed representations, even while denying that anything in that world corresponds in any suitably direct way to the tense of the representations we thereby use. It is rather as if someone who denied the reality of colour, because of its secondary-quality status, nevertheless insisted that, even if there had never been any creatures with visual apparatus, grass, say, would still have been green.[[15]](#footnote-15)15

*Seventh suggestion*: The issue whether tense is real is the issue whether a description of reality consisting only of tenseless representations (representations from no temporal point of view) would, no matter how exhaustive it was, be incomplete (cf. Dummett ([1978c](#B93)), pp. 356–357).

I take it that for a description of reality to be complete is for it to be such that, given any fact, it (the description of reality) entails that that fact obtains.[[16]](#footnote-16)16 But then the very idea of a complete description of reality might be incoherent, for reasons having nothing to do with the reality of tense. (Perhaps some variation on Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle, or on Gödel’s theorem, might scupper the idea.[[17]](#footnote-17)17) If so, then the necessary incompleteness of a description of reality consisting only of tenseless representations would have no implications for the reality of tense. This suggestion also fails.[[18]](#footnote-18)18

*Eighth suggestion*: The issue whether tense is real is the issue whether assimilation of a description of reality consisting only of tenseless representations would, no matter how exhaustive the description was, leave room for ignorance.

This suggestion is like the seventh, only worse. It is worse because, even if a complete description of reality were possible, and even if some being had assimilated such a description, there might still be things of which the being was ignorant. This is admittedly paradoxical; and the paradox deserves a fuller discussion than I can offer here. But the point is relatively simple. Granted that a complete description of reality is a description of reality such that, given any fact, it entails that that fact obtains, then there are all sorts of ways in which a being that had assimilated such a description might nevertheless lack knowledge. For one thing, the being’s knowledge might not be closed under entailment (that is to say, the being’s knowledge might not include everything it entails). But even if we put that consideration to one side, the being might lack non-propositional knowledge such as knowledge of how to write beautiful music. More pertinently, the being might lack tensed knowledge such as knowledge of what the date is. Or at least, some argument is required to show that this is not the case. Pending such an argument, the possibility remains open that the being’s lacking this knowledge would be nothing but a failure on its part to know some of the facts from a temporal point of view—not a failure on its part to know these facts at all. And if that were so, then nothing would follow about the reality of tense. Thus those who insist that tense is real because tenseless knowledge, no matter how exhaustive it was, would leave room for ignorance are guilty, it seems to me, of a straightforward *non sequitur*.[[19]](#footnote-19)19

**2. One issue that could reasonably be what is meant by the issue whether tense is real**

I said in response to the first suggestion that it was a variation on the suggestion that I would eventually endorse. Indeed I think that if, in place of the word ‘can’, it had contained the word ‘must’, the suggestion would have been acceptable. I therefore propose the following:

The issue whether tense is real is the issue whether the truth conditions of a tensed representation must be given by means of a representation that is itself tensed.[[20]](#footnote-20)20

The point is this. Tense is first and foremost a feature of certain representations. The fact that something in reality admits of being represented in this way is not enough to license the claim that the feature is ‘real’; that there is something in reality corresponding in some suitably direct way to the feature. But the fact that something in reality *demands* to be represented in this way, provided it were a fact, would be enough.

*Objection*: Would it not be more than enough? Suppose that the truth conditions of a tensed representation do *not* have to be given by means of a representation that is tensed. Suppose, in other words, that they can be given by means of a representation that is tenseless. Does it follow that tense is unreal? After all, to echo a point that arose in connection with the fifth suggestion, it may be possible to give the truth conditions of a representation that is explicitly about a dog without oneself making any reference to the dog but rather by referring to its several parts and saying how they must stand in relation to one another in order for the representation to be true. If so, it certainly does not follow that nothing in reality directly corresponds to that feature of the representation which indicates that it is about a dog, nor that the dog is in any sense unreal.

*Reply*: There is a crucial difference between the reality of tense and the reality of a dog. The latter, unlike the former, does not have to be understood in terms of some antecedent grasp of a certain feature of representations. Or so I claim. If I am wrong about that—if there are decisive arguments for some sort of idealism whereby the reality of the dog does have to be understood in this way—then so be it: the dog is unreal.

*Second objection*: According to the proposed characterization, if the truth conditions of a tensed representation can be given by means of a representation that is tenseless, then tense is unreal. But might it not also be the case that the truth conditions of a tenseless representation can be given by means of a representation that is tensed? And if it *is* the case, should not parity of reasoning force us to conclude that tenselessness is unreal too (cf. (Priest) [1986](#B257))?

*Reply*: Yes, but there is no contradiction in this. Both tense and tenselessness are features of representations. It may be that *neither* corresponds in any suitably direct way to any feature of what is represented.

*Third objection*: Suppose that tenseless representations are not possible at all. Or, less dramatically, suppose that it is not possible to identify a temporal point of view tenselessly. Then must not the truth conditions of a tensed representation be given by means of a representation that is itself tensed, but not for reasons that have anything to do with the reality of tense?

*Reply*: It is true that I am taking for granted the possibility both of tenseless representations and of tenseless identifications of temporal points of view.[[21]](#footnote-21)21 The characterization above fails if either of these things is not possible. However, I have an alternative characterization of the issue for which I claim the following: if both of these things *are* possible, it is equivalent to the characterization above, and, if they are not, it succeeds anyway.

According to the characterization above, if tense is real, then there is no giving the truth conditions of a representation from a given temporal point of view except by producing a representation that is itself from some temporal point of view. But this can only be because there is no giving the truth conditions of a representation from a given temporal point of view except by producing a representation that is from *that very same* temporal point of view. For suppose the latter is not the case. Suppose, for example, that I can give the truth conditions of an utterance I made yesterday of the sentence ‘It is humid today’ by saying, ‘My utterance yesterday was true if and only if it was humid yesterday.’ Then there is nothing to prevent me from giving the truth conditions of my utterance tenselessly, by tenselessly identifying the temporal point of view I had yesterday—say, by specifying yesterday’s date. Or, at least, there is nothing to prevent me from doing this unless tenseless representations are not possible at all, or unless tenseless identifications of temporal points of view are not possible—say, because there is no tenselessly saying what is meant by ‘*anno domini*’. What this shows is that the heart of the view that tense is real is that something in reality corresponds in a specially direct way to the actual tense of any given tensed representation, not just to its being tensed. Thus, whether or not tenseless representations are possible, and whether or not tenseless identifications of temporal points of view are possible, the following will do as an alternative characterization of the issue:

The issue whether tense is real is the issue whether the truth conditions of a representation from a temporal point of view must be given by means of a representation that is from that very same temporal point of view.[[22]](#footnote-22)22

**3. Why it is an open question whether tense is real on this construal**

The question I must now address is whether this characterization of the issue violates the Interest Constraint. More specifically, does it make the view that tense is real a straw man?

Note first that the view does not impugn my right to say of yesterday’s utterance of ‘It is humid today’ that it was true if and only if it was humid yesterday. For even if I am right to say this, it remains an open question whether I thereby give the truth conditions of yesterday’s utterance. On the view that tense is real, so characterized, I do not.[[23]](#footnote-23)23 On that view, the truth conditions of yesterday’s utterance are not that it was humid yesterday. At most they correspond in some specially intimate way to the conditions that it was humid yesterday: the obtaining of either at most affords some sort of guarantee of the obtaining of the other. But they are not the same, because the truth conditions of yesterday’s utterance contain something that directly corresponds to the tense of the utterance, something that precludes my giving those truth conditions except by reproducing that tense, which I can no longer do. This in turn means that, if yesterday’s utterance was true, then the fact that made it true can no longer be so much as expressed.[[24]](#footnote-24)24

Whatever there is to be said against this view, I do not believe that it is a straw man. For instance, on this view, representations from temporal points of view other than the present can still be acknowledged, now, as representations. They can still be acknowledged as either true or false. More particularly, they can still be acknowledged as having truth conditions. And we can still talk about these truth conditions, just as we can talk about the facts that make the representations true or false. In what terms? In precisely those terms—referring to them as we would to things of any other kind. (I can talk about ‘the fact’ that made something I said yesterday true, just as I can talk about ‘the tree’ that I was sitting under when I said it.) This much is necessary if the view is to have any intelligibility at all. What we cannot do, if the view is correct, is to *express* the fact that makes any one of these representations true or false. We cannot produce a representation, either tensed or tenseless, that is itself made true by the same fact.

The picture that supports this view—the only picture, so far as I can see, that *can* support it—is that reality fractures into different worlds, where a world is constituted by a set of facts. Each temporal point of view carries its own world with it. Some facts, say the fact that *e* = *mc*2, may constitute more than one world.[[25]](#footnote-25)25 But for each world, there are also facts that peculiarly constitute it, in the sense that they constitute no other world. These facts can be expressed only from the corresponding temporal point of view. For any one of these facts, there may be facts constituting other worlds that correspond in some specially intimate way to it (in the sense alluded to above). But such correspondence falls short of identity.

This picture does not seem to me to admit of any simple refutation.[[26]](#footnote-26)26 To be sure, if there is a correspondence of the kind just referred to, then there are awkward questions that remain to be addressed about its nature, and about just what sort of guarantee there is that, if one of these facts obtains, then all the corresponding facts obtain too. But those who adopt this picture are not, *per se*, under any obligation to answer these questions. For they are not, *per se*, committed to there being any such correspondence. Indeed they may expressly deny that there is. Thus suppose that the following entry occurs in a forty-year-old diary of mine: ‘Running a temperature today.’ They may challenge my right to say of this entry that it was true if and only if I was running a temperature on the day in question,[[27]](#footnote-27)27 in order to accommodate a certain kind of anti-realism about the past. (I have in mind a view that allows for the possibility that, although I am entitled to say of the diary entry that it was true, say because there is evidence that I was always impeccably accurate in my diary entries forty years ago, I am not entitled to say that I was running a temperature on the day in question, because there is no longer any evidence available that I was—a possibility that rests on a distinction between evidence that is available today for my running a temperature then and evidence that is available today for evidence that was available then for it.[[28]](#footnote-28)28) Less radically, they may challenge my right to say the same sort of thing about an utterance I made yesterday in the future tense. ‘Less radically’ because the corresponding view about the future arguably constitutes a kind of common sense. Thus suppose I said yesterday, ‘I shall be in London tomorrow.’ And suppose I am now in London. Even so, according to the view I have in mind, the future is open in such a way that my utterance yesterday was not (yet) true: it was not (yet) the case that I would be in London today; there was no fact obtaining then that corresponds to the fact obtaining now that licenses my saying today, ‘I am in London.’[[29]](#footnote-29)29

There are some large and fascinating philosophical questions, incidentally, about how these worlds compare with the possible worlds acknowledged by modal realists, or with the worlds acknowledged by those who accept the ‘many worlds’ interpretation of quantum mechanics.[[30]](#footnote-30)30 Discussion of these questions would take us too far afield. I shall simply make the following three observations, which I think highlight important analogies and disanalogies between these worlds and other kinds of world. First, each of these worlds is part of reality. (The view is after all that tense is real.) Secondly, each of them is part of reality at the expense of something else. In other words, there are other worlds that reality might have contained: there are other ways that the facts might have been. Thirdly, an object that appears in one of these worlds, in the sense that it figures in a fact that constitutes one of these worlds, can also appear in another.[[31]](#footnote-31)31 In particular, a representation produced from one temporal point of view can be referred to from another temporal point of view. Nevertheless no tensed representation answers to any facts except those that constitute the world associated with the point of view from which it is produced.[[32]](#footnote-32)32

**4. A failed argument that tense is unreal on this construal, based on Kant’s deduction of the categories**

The view that tense is real abnegates the unity of reality, then. The question now arises whether this can be turned into an objection to the view. Is the unity of reality something that can be argued for?

One might think that Kant’s deduction of the categories provides such an argument. In particular, one might try to extract the following argument from the deduction.

Given any judgement I make, it must be possible for the ‘I think’ to accompany that judgement. It must be possible for me to think, not only that this is how things are, but that *I think* this is how things are. Otherwise the judgement would not be one of mine. Alternatively, if something is to count as a judgement, then its elements must be combined together in a certain way. They must be held together in a certain unity. And such unity must be capable of being acknowledged by the judge—by me, if the judgement is one of mine. But such unity is what I myself supply in making the judgement. So in acknowledging the unity I am in effect acknowledging the judgement as one that I have made. I am acknowledging that *I think* this is how things are. And the unity is the same for any judgement I make. It is what constitutes the judgement as one of mine. It is the unity of my own apperception. But now let *f*1 and *f*2 be any two facts. Assuming that it is in principle possible for me to judge that each obtains, then it must be in principle possible for me not only to make each of the two relevant judgements but to acknowledge the unity in which each of them is held together, the same in each case, the unity of my apperception. But then it must be in principle possible for me to acknowledge *both* judgements as ones that I have made. Hence it must be in principle possible for me to make a single judgement that embraces both. To telescope the argument: making separate judgements that *f*1 obtains and that *f*2 obtains enables me to make separate judgements that *I think* that *f*1 obtains and that *I think* that *f*2 obtains, which enables me to make a single judgement that *I think* that both *f*1 and *f*2 obtain, which enables me to make a single judgement that both *f*1 and *f*2 obtain. This means that *f*1 and *f*2 are part of the same world. They are part of *my* world. The unity of my apperception signals the unity of reality. To quote Kant ([1933](#B167)), B141: ‘A judgement is nothing but the manner in which given modes of knowledge are brought to the objective unity of apperception. This is what is intended by the copula “is”.’

This argument fails, however. More particularly, there are Kantian reasons why it fails. Perhaps the most obvious objection to it is that it rests on the unargued assumption that, for any two facts, it is in principle possible for me to judge that each obtains. But this is not the objection I wish to focus on, for two reasons. First, this assumption is not one that an advocate of the reality of tense is liable to query, provided that I can make judgements from different temporal points of view, and pending worries about times at which I do not exist. (I shall say some more about this proviso below.) Secondly, the assumption is not one that prevents the argument from succeeding in Kantian terms. Suitably qualified and suitably understood, it is an assumption that Kant himself would have been prepared to grant.[[33]](#footnote-33)33 The objection I wish to focus on is rather this. Even if it is possible for me to acknowledge each of two separate judgements I make as held together in the unity of my apperception, it does not follow that I can simultaneously acknowledge them both as held together in that unity, or at least not in such a way that I can endorse them both. If the two judgements are made from two different temporal points of view, then it is straightforwardly question-begging to suppose that I can do more, whether from one of those points of view or not, than see them as two judgements answering to how things are in two worlds. It is straightforwardly question-begging, in other words, to suppose that I can integrate them into a single judgement. Even though, in making the two judgements, I bring each of them into the unity of my apperception, there remains the possibility that I do so only as two essentially separate cognitive acts, each of which precludes any repetition of the other. To exclude this possibility, one would need to appeal to something about the character of the judgements themselves. One would need to show that it is in the nature of the judgements themselves to allow for such repetition (cf. Allison ([1983](#B2)), p. 162).

But perhaps the very fact that each judgement is one of *mine* allows for this? Perhaps the two judgements cannot count as two judgements by the same person unless, in the passage from the point of view from which one judgement is made to the point of view from which the other is made, there is provision for a kind of ‘constancy’ of judgement, or a kind of ‘retention’ of judgement—the sort of thing that allows me at one time to see that things are precisely as I earlier predicted they would be, or to remember that things are precisely as I earlier saw they were. If I cannot now make any judgement that answers to the same fact as any of the tensed judgements I have made in the past, then we lose our grip on the idea that it really was *I*—not merely some counterpart of me—who made all those judgements.[[34]](#footnote-34)34

This suggestion, I think, cuts very deep. But it is ineffectual against an intransigent advocate of the reality of tense who is prepared to concede that it was indeed not strictly speaking I, but merely some counterpart of me, who made all those judgements. Such a person might argue that the unity of apperception, which enables any judgement to be made, cannot carry over from one world to another; that this would be contrary to its very unity; that the makers of judgements are essentially ephemeral (cf. note 31).

**5. Why there is no arguing that tense is unreal on this construal**

I said that the argument given for the unity of reality fails even in Kantian terms. This is significant *vis-à-vis* Kant’s project in the deduction.

Kant’s project in the deduction is not to defend the unity of reality. It is to defend our right to apply the categories as we do.[[35]](#footnote-35)35 And, as Dieter Henrich has famously argued, he undertakes to provide this defence, at least in the version of the deduction that appears in the second edition of his *Critique of Pure Reason*, in two steps.[[36]](#footnote-36)36 In the first step, he tries to show that we are justified in applying the categories to what is united in a certain way. In the second step, he tries to show that what we in fact apply the categories to—that which is in space and time—is indeed united in that way.[[37]](#footnote-37)37 In the second step he appeals to the fact that ‘space and time are represented a priori not merely as *forms* of sensible intuition, but as themselves *intuitions* which contain a manifold . . . and therefore are represented with the determination of the *unity* of this manifold’ (Kant ([1933](#B167)), B160, his emphasis). That is, he appeals to the fact, to which he has already appealed and attached much importance in ‘The Transcendental Aesthetic’ (A24-5/B39 and A31-2/B47), that space and time, and therewith that which is in space and time, are *given* to us as having the requisite unity. ‘Fact’ is the operative word here. Kant thinks it conceivable, in the abstract, that things should have been different. ‘Appearances might very well be so constituted,’ he writes (A90/B123), ‘that understanding should not find them to be in accordance with the conditions of its unity.’ That is, they might be so constituted that they should lack the unity necessary for us to be justified in applying the categories to them. Had they been made up of different worlds associated with different temporal points of view, this would have been the case. We should have had no justification, for example, in applying the category of causation across such worlds. This is reflected in the fact that we could not have used the schema ‘*p* because *q*’ to adjudge that one of the facts that (peculiarly) constituted one world was causally dependent on one of the facts that (peculiarly) constituted another. We could not have used this schema because the two facts would have had to be represented from two incompatible points of view.[[38]](#footnote-38)38

We can now see better why the argument given in the previous section fails even in Kantian terms. It relies on certain highly abstract considerations about judgement and unity. But it is clear from the way in which Kant proceeds in the deduction that he does not think that the unity of *temporal* reality can be argued for in any such way, certainly not in any such abstract way. For Kant, this unity is something more like a brute fact, a fact about how time is given to us. If it is possible for someone to integrate two judgements from different temporal points of view into a single judgement, this is in part because of the quintessence of time (the quintessence of the ‘space’ in which each of the two different points of view is located).

As for the way in which time is given to us, on Kant’s conception, this is through the ‘transcendental synthesis of imagination’, where ‘transcendental’ synthesis is defined as synthesis that ‘not merely . . . [takes] place a priori, but also . . . [conditions] the possibility of other a priori knowledge’, and ‘imagination’ is defined as ‘the faculty of representing in intuition an object that is *not itself present*’ (Kant ([1933](#B167)), B151, his emphasis. See also B151 ff.) It follows that time is given to us as having parts, as something that is partly past and partly future: imagination is the faculty that provides for the possibility of memory and expectation. Now this in turn may seem to conflict with the idea that time is given to us as having unity. But it does not. Past and future are indeed different parts of time, but they are parts that are (transcendentally) synthesized into a whole. They are features of a single temporal world. (This is why time is not only given to us as having unity, it is given to us as having the kind of unity that justifies our applying the categories to it and to its contents.[[39]](#footnote-39)39) Through memory we are able to recall, and thereby to represent, the very facts that we once witnessed as present. Through expectation we are able to anticipate, and again thereby to represent, the very facts that we shall later witness as present.

If this is on even broadly the right lines—and I am sure it is—then tense is unreal. The unreality of tense, or equivalently the unity of temporal reality, is of a piece with the unity of apperception. We can achieve insight into it through a kind of self-conscious reflection. But we cannot argue for it. Thus if we consider our own tensed representations and reflect on how we conceive them and what they answer to, then we can come to see them as representations, from different positions within a single world, of that single world—just as, if I consider my own representations (tensed or tenseless) and reflect on how I conceive them and my capacity to produce them, I can come to see them as representations produced by a single self-conscious subject occupying different positions within a single world. Even so, if someone resolutely refuses to acknowledge the unity of temporal reality—if someone conceives of tense as a feature of reality—then there is no more basic principle we can adduce to force a change of mind. The unity of temporal reality is indeed, to that extent, akin to a brute fact. There is a great deal to be said about it. But there is nothing, or at least nothing with any suasive power, to be said in favour of it.[[40]](#footnote-40)40, 41

1. 1 <IBT>Kant ([1933](#B167))</IBT>, A84–92/B116–124. The deduction is given in A95–130 and, differently, in B129–169. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. 2 This phrase occurs e.g. in ibid. B135. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. 3 For a very helpful survey see Le Poidevin ([1998](#B185)). One of the issues that I shall not be discussing is whether a being that was completely outside time could have any conception of what the past, the present, or the future were: cf. Dummett ([1978c](#B93)). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. 4 There is another constraint that I might be expected to try to respect in this connection: namely, to characterize the issue in such a way that it is not terminological, i.e. in such a way that those who profess a belief in the reality of tense and those who profess a belief in the unreality of tense do not have at their disposal some (mutually acceptable) scheme of translation whereby they can recognize that they are not in dispute after all. But I am much less confident that the characterization I shall provide conforms with this second constraint than I am that it conforms with the Interest Constraint. For one thing, the two constraints are in some tension with each other: the clearer it is that neither of the opposing views in any given philosophical debate is a straw man, the less clear it is that what divides them *is* more than terminological. But I am also much less certain that respecting this second constraint is necessary for ensuring that the issue characterized is worthy of attention. The expression ‘terminological’ has all sorts of pejorative overtones. But I see no reason why an issue cannot be terminological, in the sense defined, and also of considerable philosophical moment—if, for instance, it is an issue about which of two conceptual schemes is better equipped to meet certain theoretical and/or practical needs. (This is related to David Cockburn’s project in his extremely interesting (1997).) Whether the issue on which I shall be focusing is an issue of this kind is a question that I find enormously difficult. Nothing I say in this essay will help to settle the question. But neither will anything I say depend on how it ought to be settled. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. 5 I shall be relying heavily on Cockburn ([1997](#B45)), which, in effect, gives voice to such scepticism. At the end of one particularly pertinent chapter (Ch. 6), Cockburn says that he has been involved in ‘an attempt to dissolve the dispute between tensed and tenseless theories [i.e. theories that do and theories that do not accept the reality of tense] as this is widely understood’ (p. 127). ‘As this is widely understood’ indicates that he has in mind something metaphysical. (He allows room for a related ethical dispute.) Granted that my own concerns are broadly metaphysical, Cockburn’s chapter challenges my aspiration to identify even one dispute in this territory while respecting the Interest Constraint. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. 6 This is as much as I am going to say about how I shall be using the term ‘representation’, other than to add here that, on my conception, a representation is something that is true or false, without relativization. There is much more that could be said, obviously. In particular, there is much that could be said in response to the worry that, by assuming that there are things that are true or false without relativization, I may, in the context of this essay, be begging some crucial questions. E.g. Richard Swinburne says that the unreality of tense follows from the assumption that truth is timeless (Swinburne ([1990](#B329)), p. 120). However, I think I can allay this worry. For whatever relativization may be involved in ascriptions of truth and falsity—such as the obvious relativization of a sentence-type to a time of utterance, and perhaps also, the relativization of an utterance to a time of evaluation (cf. Wright ([1987](#B377)), §7 and Campbell ([1994](#B37)), pp. 228–230)—I hereby simply stipulate that all the relevant relata are to be thought of as already bound up in the notion of a representation, thus guaranteeing that any given representation can be regarded as true or false without further relativization. Cf. Percival ([1994](#B247)), p. 205. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. 7 By the truth conditions of a representation I mean the conditions that must be satisfied—the way things must be—in order for the representation to be true. (This notion, it must be said straight away, needs all sorts of clarification. In fact, as we shall see, it needs clarification that is highly pertinent to the issue on which I shall eventually fasten. But because there is more than one acceptable way to clarify it, and because I think that the choice between these may itself be part of settling the issue—this relates to what I said in n. 4 about the possibility of the issue’s being terminological—I am deliberately going to leave the notion in this unclarified form.) Note: the canonical way of giving the truth conditions of a representation is to say that it is true if and only if things are a certain way. And sometimes it is possible to do this by simply re-using the sentence that was used in producing the representation in the first place. Thus I can give the truth conditions of an utterance of the sentence ‘Water contains oxygen’, by saying, ‘This utterance is true if and only if water contains oxygen.’ But sometimes greater subtlety is called for. I cannot give the truth conditions of an utterance *by you* of the sentence ‘I am thirsty’ by saying, ‘This utterance is true if and only if I am thirsty.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. 8 The issues that arise here were classically brought into focus in Prior ([1959](#B258)). They are pursued in MacBeath ([1983](#B196)) and Mellor ([1983](#B215)). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. 9 See Wright ([1987](#B377)) and Tooley ([1997](#B334)) respectively. See further section 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. 10 On this way of construing the claim, I think there *is* an issue here that could reasonably be what is meant by the issue whether tense is real—precisely because of the metaphysical concerns mentioned in parenthesis. However, it is not the issue on which I wish to focus. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. 11 This is reminiscent of one of the key steps in J.M.E. McTaggart’s celebrated argument for the unreality of time: see McTaggart ([1993](#B212)), pp. 31–32. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. 12 For more on this notion of a representation’s type, see Moore ([1997](#B224)), pp. 9–11. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. 13 The indexical features of a representation are those features of it that indicate that it is from a certain point of view, in the way that tense does. Thus, if I say, ‘It is icy over there’, my use of the phrase ‘over there’ is an indexical feature of the representation I produce: it indicates that the representation is from a certain spatial point of view. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. 14 There are similar choices to be made with respect to ‘proposition’, ‘belief’, and other related terms; there is e.g. the choice about whether to say that the two representations express the same proposition. See Swinburne ([1990](#B329)), §3 and Mellor ([1998](#B217)), §2 for more on these choices. (I do not think that any of the choices generates a real issue. But it is a serious question why not—granted what I said above in n. 4 about the possibility of an issue’s being both terminological, in the sense defined there, and ‘of considerable philosophical moment’. I have nothing to offer in response to this question but an appeal to judgement. All the crucial distinctions that need to be drawn here, such as the distinction between a choice on which something of substance hangs and a choice on which nothing of substance hangs, are distinctions of degree, not of kind. My own judgement is that not enough hangs on these choices for there to be any serious philosophical point in debating them. This is what I mean by saying that none of the choices generates a real issue. I shall leave it to others to decide how far this distances me from either Swinburne or Mellor.) [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. 15 Cf. the discussion of ‘rigidification’ in Wright ([1992](#B378)), pp. 113–114. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. 16 Michael Dummett, in his (1978c), p. 356, glosses ‘complete’ as ‘observer-independent’. But he is presumably stating an entailment, not offering a definition. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. 17 For discussion of each of these, see Penrose ([1989](#B245)), pp. 248–250 and 105–108 respectively. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. 18 Can it not be turned into a good suggestion by a suitable insertion of the word ‘thereby’? Perhaps. But something needs to be said about what work is being done by the word, and I suspect that, if the amended suggestion really is a good one, then it will turn out to be the same as the suggestion that I shall eventually endorse. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. 19 Examples are Swinburne ([1990](#B329)), §§5 and 6, and Lucas ([1998](#B195)). For a fuller discussion of these issues see Moore ([1997](#B224)), pp. 53–58 and 171–172. Cf. Lewis ([1983](#B189)) and Perry ([1993](#B248)). Cf. also Butterfield ([1985](#B35)), which connects with my essay at several points. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. 20 Cf. Priest ([1986](#B257)), pp. 162–163. Cf. also Mellor ([1993](#B216)), p. 59, with a slightly different but closely related gloss on the issue. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. 21 Arguments for and against the possibility of tenseless representations can be found in Le Poidevin ([1998](#B185)–99) and Teichmann ([1998](#B332)) respectively. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. 22 *Counter-objection*: Is there not an intermediate position, based on a belief in the openness of the future, which undermines what I say in this paragraph: namely, the position whereby there are some tensed representations whose truth conditions can be given by means of representations that are from the same temporal points of view *or later ones*, though they cannot be given by means of representations that are from earlier temporal points of view because the truth conditions come into existence at a certain time and are simply not available to be given before then?—*Reply*: This position certainly muddies the waters. Unless it can be ruled out (which, ultimately, I think it can) then what I say in the main text needs modification—but not, I think, in a way that affects the main point that I am making. For even if the position is correct, there remains a sense in which it is not possible to give the truth conditions of a representation from a temporal point of view except by producing a representation that is from that very same temporal point of view: the sense, namely, in which a temporal point of view is a (possibly infinite) period of time, not a point in time. For a very thorough discussion of the issues and complications that arise here, with its own distinctive angle on them, see Tooley ([1997](#B334)). [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. 23 I said in n. 7 that the canonical way of giving the truth conditions of a representation is to say that it is true if and only if things are a certain way. It does not follow that saying that a representation is true if and only if things are a certain way always constitutes giving its truth conditions. It may constitute giving other, correlated conditions. (See further below, in the main text.) [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. 24 Cf. Dummett ([1978d](#B94)), p. 373 and Perry ([1993](#B248)), pp. 45–46. And cf. Frege ([1967](#B121)), pp. 24–26, for a similar view concerning personal points of view. Note, however, that Michael Dummett, in the first of these references, is talking about a particular philosophical thesis (a kind of anti-realism about the past, whereby the meanings of past-tense representations are given in terms of the conditions that we can now recognize as establishing their truth or falsity) which is such that, if any statement of it is true, then what makes that statement true cannot be expressed at a later time—though the thesis in question *accepts* the unreality of tense, as characterized here (see e.g. Dummett ([1978d](#B94)), pp. 363–364). It follows that the issue whether tense is real, as characterized here, is not the same as the issue whether we should endorse the philosophical thesis in question, even though that thesis has importantly similar consequences. It may also follow, ultimately, that that thesis is internally incoherent. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. 25 To say that a fact constitutes a world is an elliptical way of saying that it belongs to the set of facts that constitute that world. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. 26 Two comments are in order about how this squares with what I say in Moore ([1997](#B224)). First, in Ch. 3 of that book, I seem to regard the view that tense is real as incoherent. I do, but only because I am in effect taking for granted the unity of reality (see e.g. p. 49). Granted the unity of reality, the view that tense is real degenerates into an irremediable muddle about whether the facts that make tensed representations true or false obtain only relative to a temporal point of view or not. Secondly, the view that tense is real, as characterized here, seems to be nothing but the view that tensed representations enjoy what I call in the book ‘inherent perspective’ (p. 15). Yet I am perfectly happy, in the book, to acknowledge inherent perspective; I do not seem to think that it poses any threat to the unity of reality (see e.g. pp. 50–51). Have I changed my mind about this? No. The threat to the unity of reality comes not just from the inherent perspective in tensed representations, but from that together with the fact that, for most tensed representations, there are obvious candidates from other temporal points of view to answer to the same facts. What someone who believes in the reality of tense has to explain is not just why it is impossible to give the truth conditions of a tensed representation from another temporal point of view, but why it is impossible to do so *even by means of one of these candidates*; why, for instance, I cannot give the truth conditions of yesterday’s utterance of ‘It is humid today’ by saying that it was true if and only if it was humid yesterday. I can see no other explanation but that there are different worlds associated with different temporal points of view. (This means, in the terms of the book, that if tense is real—on this conception—then not only is it impossible to endorse a tensed representation from another temporal point of view, it is impossible *indirectly* to endorse a tensed representation from another temporal point of view: see pp. 15–16.) [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. 27 Although the view that tense is real does not impugn my right to say this, neither does it secure my right to say it. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. 28 This is a variant of the thesis mentioned in n. 24. Cf. Wright ([1987](#B377)), §VI and Campbell ([1994](#B37)), Ch. 7. (In §5 of the latter Campbell suggests that the view is unstable. But on p. 248 he admits that he is prescinding from the possibility that evidence that there was evidence for something is to be distinguished from evidence for that thing.) [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. 29 If this is right, or if there is a failure of correspondence of any other kind, then not only does each of the worlds fail to contain all the facts, it fails even to ‘mirror’ all the facts in Leibnizian fashion—unless, perhaps, there is a last moment of time. See Leibniz ([1973](#B184)), §§56 and 61. Cf. Dummett ([1981a](#B96)), pp. 391 ff.; and cf. n. 22. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. 30 The *locus classicus* for the first of these is Lewis ([1986](#B190)), and for the second Everett (1957). [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. 31 Indeed an object’s thus appearing in more than one world is a necessary condition of its persisting through time. However, it is not a sufficient condition of the object’s persisting through time. There can be facts about objects that no longer exist. Those who adopt this picture may even find it natural to deny, and are at liberty to deny, that objects ever do, strictly speaking, persist through time. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. 32 The vast literature on these issues includes Evans ([1985b](#B108)); Percival ([1992](#B246)); Butterfield ([1995](#B36)); and Fleming ([1995](#B118)). [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. 33 This is for reasons that I hope will soon be clear. (Note: the assumption is interestingly related to, though importantly different from and independent of, Kant’s famous claim in his (1933), A493/B521, that ‘[to say] that there may be inhabitants in the moon, although no one has ever perceived them . . . only means that in the possible advance of experience we may encounter them.’) [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. 34 Cf. Campbell ([1994](#B37)), Ch. 7. Cf. also what Gareth Evans calls ‘keeping track of the passage of time’ in Evans ([1985a](#B107)), pp. 309–310. But note that what Evans has in mind here does not just involve producing a representation at one time that answers to the same fact as a representation produced at an earlier time; it involves in *some* sense reproducing the very same representation. (This means that there is an issue about whether, and how, the representation counts as being from a temporal point of view at all.) [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. 35 Kant ([1933](#B167)), A84 ff./B116 ff. The ‘categories’ are twelve fundamental *a priori* concepts of ours that Kant claims to have identified. A prime example is the concept of causation. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. 36 Henrich ([1982](#B151)). For what follows, see esp. §11. Cf. also <<CE: Reference Turctzky (1998 has not been provided in the Bibliography. Please check.>>Turctzky (1998), pp. 92–93. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. 37 The first step is completed by the end of §20. The second step is given, after some incidental observations, in §26. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. 38 To say that two points of view are incompatible is to say that no representation could be from both. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. 39 See esp. §26 of the 2nd edn version of the deduction in Kant ([1933](#B167)). Cf. Allison ([1983](#B2)), pp. 160–164, and Turetzky ([1998](#B336)), p. 93. Cf. also what Kant himself says later, at (1933), A581–582/B609–610, which, together with the footnote at A572/B600, in turn merits a striking comparison with Wittgenstein ([1961](#B365)), 2.0124 and 5.524. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. 40 This echoes a recurring theme of Moore ([1997](#B224)). I there make frequent use of two principles that are different expressions of the unity of reality: what I call the Fundamental Principle (pp. 21–22) and what I call the Basic Assumption (p. 74). I claim that such principles cannot be established by any arguments: see e.g. pp. 188–189. Cf. in this connection Michael Dummett’s remarks about what he calls ‘our prejudice’ that there must be a complete description of reality (Dummett ([1978c](#B93)), pp. 356–357), and John Campbell’s comments about the ineluctability of a realist view of the past (Campbell ([1994](#B37)), p. 4). And see again the remarks in n. 4.

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