When the overwhelming power that makes me feel that something used to be there, though all that appears before my eyes are traces, comes at me from these remnants,

I call this overwhelming power the past that springs up into “now.”

The past that springs up into “now” is this “power.”

It is not past events themselves.

The future, too, springs up as power. Both the past and the future overflow into the arena of “now.”
The past that springs up now

The future that springs up now

In other words, it’s like this:

Examples of “the future” that springs up “now” include things like “I will grow old” and “I will die.”

You can’t just say the past and the future appear “now”!

That’s cheating.
Hasn’t time been flowing since long before I was born, and hasn’t history been continuously unfolding?

Time has been flowing objectively since forever.

Isn’t it obvious that the past exists independently of “now”?
Doesn’t “now” stand at this end of the 4.6 billion-year history of the Earth?

The Earth is born

4 billion years ago

2 billion years ago

1 billion years ago

“Now”

Does the past itself exist or not?

Then let me ask you, where does the past itself exist?

Waaah I have no idea!
Let’s try thinking about it from a different angle. Normally, we think about the flow of time like this.

Right

Time that has already passed

The moment between the past and the future

Present

Time that is going to emerge

Past Future

The flow of time

Let’s compare the common-sense view of time described above and the arena of “now.”
The past that springs up now

To begin with, while “the past that springs up now” exists inside the arena of “now,”

The arena of “now”

“Now”

“the past itself” does not, because it has already passed out of it.

Similarly, “the future itself” does not exist within the arena of “now” either, because it has not yet arrived.
So does “the present, this very moment” exist within the arena of “now”?

Yes

Actually, “the present moment” doesn’t exist inside the arena of “now” either.

You can’t be serious.

This is the case because the arena of “now” is made up of things that change.

No matter where you look in the arena of “now,” a frozen “present moment” that is wholly unchanging is nowhere to be found.
In other words, neither “the past itself,” “the present moment,” nor “the future itself” exist in the arena of “now.”

That is, of course, a possibility, but I have no way of confirming it.

This is the case because the act of confirming it can only be undertaken inside the arena of “now.” It can never reach the outside of “now.”

Instead, what is certain is that we possess the concept* of “past – present – future,” even if “past – present – future” as an existing entity is nowhere to be found...

*Concept means “an abstract image in your head”
And to understand time we need both the arena of “now” and the concept of “past-present-future.”

In other words, we end up with something like this:

First there is the arena of “now,” and then the concept of “past-present-future” springs up into it.

The arena of “now”

(Taking notes)

The concept of “past-present-future”

Once there is a concept of “past-present-future,” it becomes possible to grasp “the past that springs up now,” “the arena of now,” and “the future that springs up now” as a three-part set.
In other words, these two conceptions arise with each other’s help.

The arena of “now”

Helping each other

The concept of “past-present-future”

You’re wrong! “Past-present-future” isn’t just a concept!

Even if it doesn’t appear in the arena of “now,” it is obvious that the past of 200 years ago is a real past, and still exists as a fixed part of history!!
You want to say that “past-present-future” isn’t just a concept of some sort, but really exists somewhere.

That’s right!

I understand. Let me explain.

“Past-present-future” itself cannot be seen or touched, and its location cannot be determined.

But we cannot help thinking it really exists.

Day by day we live our lives believing that it really exists.

In other words, we live with a strong conviction that there really is a “past-present-future,” and that this is no dream or illusion.
Well then, what sort of conviction is “the past really exists”?

It is a conviction that what has passed enters a world of things I cannot change and becomes fixed.

Next, what sort of conviction is “the future really exists”?

It is a conviction that going forward there is a limitless horizon that stretches before my eyes.

Finally, what sort of conviction is “the present really exists”?

It is a conviction that I am living in this very moment in which time has no span.
If we put all of this together, to say that there really is a "past-present-future" means the following:

The past is fixed outside of the arena of “now.”

The future expands as a limitless horizon outside of the arena of “now.”

I am living this moment in which time has no span.

These convictions come to us with great intensity,

and their power is so strong and evident,

there is no way we can seriously question their correctness.
The arena of “now”

The concept of “past-present-future”

If we think about it rationally, what can be said to actually exist is only that which appears within the arena of “now.”

(Taking notes)

The present moment itself

The fixed past itself  The future that stretches like a horizon itself

As a conviction, however, we cannot help thinking a “past-present-future” itself that does not appear in the arena of “now” also really exists.
We are able to understand the sentence “a year ago there was an earthquake,” because we believe that there really is a “past-present-future” itself.

We understand it like this:

“If I were to go back to one year ago, I would be experiencing an earthquake.”

That is how strong this conviction is.
So why does the “past-present-future” itself come at us with such intense power that we cannot help but think it really exists?

Because it is a social construct.

Because it is a product of time tenses in language.

Various ways of thinking about it are possible, but I’d like to take the following approach:

This intense power arises because I am “trying to live.”
Even when I’m not particularly conscious of “living,” my body is always “trying to live.”

If danger comes at me I try to avoid it without thinking.

(Rummaging) When I am hungry I go and look for something to eat.

My body’s cells are constantly metabolizing.
I am always “trying to live” with my entire body.

I am trying to live, and to take “the next step.”

In order to commit to taking the “next step,” I need to be able to convince myself there is solid ground beneath my feet.
The conviction that “the future itself” exists is the ground that supports “the next step.”

To take “the next step” is to walk towards the future.

The conviction that “the future itself” exists arises because our entire bodies want to live. Not the other way around.
The conviction that the future itself exists

The conviction that the past itself exists

The conviction that the present itself exists as a link between the two

In this way various convictions then arise one after another.

Now you understand why “past-present-future” itself comes at us with such force, don’t you?

Because I, as someone who is trying “to live,” create it myself as something I absolutely need to survive.

As long as I am “trying to live,”

I can never seriously doubt this conviction that makes “trying to live” possible.
Of course, I did not create the conviction that “past-present-future” itself exists all by myself.

Society

It’s a conviction that has survived intense scrutiny within social interactions.

I have learned this conviction from society and made it my own, and in this sense it can also be said that it is created by society.
What happens to time if I stop trying to live?

Good question

When you are really no longer “trying to live,” the need for “past-present-future” itself weakens, so presumably the conviction that “past-present-future” itself exists weakens as well.

Perhaps you arrive at a perception of time in which things simply change and pass by within the arena of “now.”
So in the end, which is correct?

The arena of “now” or “past-present-future” itself?

As a matter of reason, what can be said to definitely exist is only the arena of “now.”

We also believe, however, in the existence of the “past-present-future” itself as a strongly held conviction.

These two conceptions support each other, so it is not as though only one is correct.

I believe the mystery of time can only be solved when they are brought together.

As for what comes next, I’m still trying to work that out...
So what exactly does it mean to “try to live”? It means trying to take the next step toward the future, and to build new things on top of the past.

In other words, it means trying to create a direct connection to “the past itself” through “the past that springs up now,” and to create a direct connection to “the future itself” through “the future that springs up now.”
“To try to live” is to attempt to fly outside the arena of “now” and create connections to things that are not “now.”

It can also be described, however, as a reckless attempt to connect to things that cannot be experienced.

And we can also see that what undergirds our theory of time is our theory of life.
So what exactly is “now”? 

There are cases in which thinking of a word’s opposite helps us better understand its meaning.

White – Black
Light – Shadow
Warm – Cold
Up – Down
Left – Right

So what’s the opposite of “now”? 

The past? The future? That which isn’t “now”? 

Wrong

The opposite of “now” is “a state of affairs in which things appear, change, and disappear, and things that have disappeared never come back again.”

Yes, it’s a bit long
In other words, within the arena of “now” things appear, change, and disappear, and once they have disappeared they never come back again, but...

Arena of “now” itself

this arena of “now” itself never changes or disappears.

No matter how many things appear, change, and disappear, the arena of “now” itself remains as it is, unchanging.
“Now” is thus a foundation that always remains the same against the constant changes of the world.

And while all things change and eventually disappear,

“now” continues to remain unaltered.

This is one meaning of “time flows.”

In other words, it is only because “now” never disappears and remains as it is that time is able to flow.
This is just like the flow of a river; the water passes by, but the ground on both banks remains still.

And just as water that has flowed down the river will never come back,

what has left the arena of “now” will never return.

From this fact we are led to others – a life that has passed will never come again,

a life exists only once,

and “now” is irreplaceably precious.
If a life only happens once, and if a life that has passed away never comes again,
then as I am living my life is gradually passing away...

and one day I’ll die and everything will disappear and become nothing!

It’s terrible!
I hate it!

Thinking about it philosophically, we don’t know whether or not everything becomes nothing when you die.

Don’t try to fool me with that kind of consolation.
Actually, I sometimes have these sorts of thoughts myself.

There is a fixed amount of time left in my life, and as I am doing this right now, aren’t my remaining hours dwindling?

During this time that I am thinking rationally about what time is, isn’t the time remaining to me growing less and less?

If so, what am I doing?

Aren’t there more important things I should be doing instead of philosophy?

... I sometimes have such thoughts.

Sensei...
I’ve learned all kinds of things about time.

But why do I get the feeling that I still don’t understand anything about its essence?

Sensei, why does time really flow?

Yes, that is indeed a true question of philosophy, and one you must spend the rest of your life contemplating!!
Doesn’t time really flow because I am really living?

That’s an interesting observation.

But what exactly do you mean by “really”?

I don’t know!
Well, what sort of living do you mean by “really living”?

I mean, even though I could just as easily never have been born...

for some reason I am really, actually living right now, in this very moment...
When I think about time, I have a feeling it’s wrong to do so without considering the fact that I am living right now.

And I suspect that the deepest mystery of time lies hidden in the idea that

“...I could just as easily never have been born.”
Manga Introduction to Philosophy
An Exploration of Time, Existence, the Self, and the Meaning of Life

Masahiro Morioka

Chapter 1 What Is Time?
  Part 1
  Part 2

Chapter 2 What Is Existence?
  Part 1
  Part 2

Chapter 3 What Is “I”?
  Part 1
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Chapter 4 What Is Life?
  Part 1
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The entire book PDF (76MB)

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