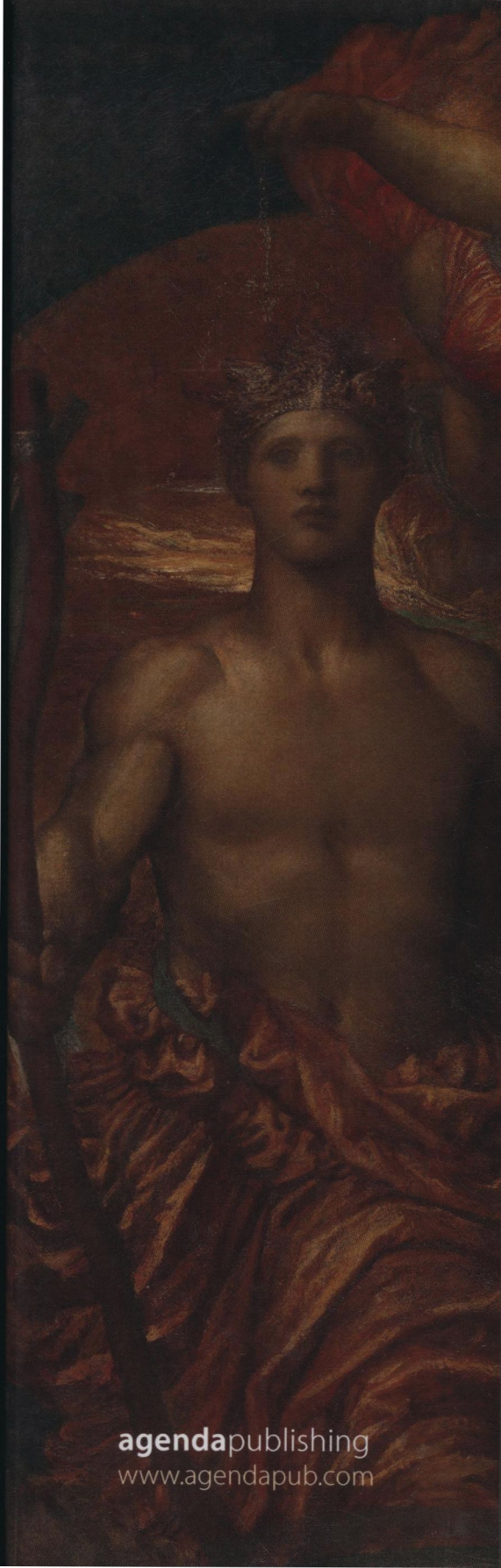


RAYMOND  
TALLIS

Of Time  
and Lamentation

REFLECTIONS ON TRANSIENCE





"There is hardly a thinking person who has not been struck, at some stage in life, by the deep mystery of time. How is it that things come into being and then pass away? What is a moment, and what flows as the moments succeed each other? Can time be recaptured, replayed, or is all time unredeemable? In this book Raymond Tallis gives us the fullest examination to date, both of time as part of the fabric of reality, and of time as the condition of self-conscious experience. He does not solve time's mystery, but his argument deepens it in a fascinating way. Written with scholarly rigour and lively humour, this study of the greatest source of our metaphysical anxieties will provide hours of pleasure and instruction to all who delve into it."

SIR ROGER SCRUTON

"Raymond Tallis takes on the challenge, bravely going where few have ventured, of investigating the painful nature of time's passage, one intimately felt yet stubbornly denied by many scientists. *Of Time and Lamentation* is an important philosophical investigation, both personal and scholarly – a bold and original experiment where art and poetry are given as much importance as science, measurements and equations."

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Of Time and Lamentation

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# Of Time and Lamentation

REFLECTIONS ON TRANSIENCE

Raymond Tallis

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For Terry, my time's dearest companion

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OF TIME AND LAMENTATION





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This book was largely conceived and written in solitude. Most of my debts therefore are to strangers whose names and publications appear in the references. Time seems to attract more than its fair share of philosophers who not only write beautifully but have the capacity to keep in view the fundamental questions (and the excitement associated with them). In addition to a (necessarily incomplete) acquaintance with primary sources, I have been guided and inspired by secondary literature, foremost among them being (in addition to Dainton's *Time and Space*), Richard Gale's *The Philosophy of Time: A Collection of Essays* (London: Macmillan, 1968), Robin Le Poidevin's *Travels in Four Dimensions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), the mighty *Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Time* edited by Craig Callender (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), and many authoritative and accessible essays in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. I have also been happily and fruitfully provoked by frequent disagreements with D. H. Mellor's *Real Time* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981) and *Real Time II* (London: Routledge, 1998), which are models to me of philosophical writing, although the reader will see at once that I cannot match his succinctness. Finally, many writers on physics have helped me get the scientific issues in focus and (perhaps not the effect they had looked for) enabled me to see more clearly the baselessness of the claims of physics to provide the answers to metaphysical problems.



I am more indebted than ever to Steven Gerrard who has been a wonderful supporter of my writing for nearly a decade and a publisher who is truly passionate about ideas.

Some of the material in this book has appeared in abbreviated form elsewhere. My regular column in *Philosophy Now* has seen earlier versions of several strands in the argument against the claims of physics to have the last word on the metaphysics of time, against logical fatalism, and on the idea that time began with a bang, and discussions of the nature of causation. The latter also draws on “Causes as (Local) Oomph” published in *Epimethean Imaginings: Philosophical and Other Meditations on Everyday Light* (Durham: Acumen, 2014). Shorter forms of the discussion of mathematics and reality in Chapter 3, of eternity in Chapter 9, and of freedom in Chapter 12 have been published in *The Mystery of Being Human: God, Free Will and the NHS* (London: Notting Hill, 2016).

Raymond Tallis

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## Overture (mainly polemic): why time?

I wasted time, and now doth time waste me. Shakespeare, *Richard II*

### PERSONAL (1)

When I wake up each morning, I am less likely to reflect that a new day has arrived than that yet another day has departed. What we unthinkingly call “the passage of time” tinges the first few minutes with apprehension. I have entered my seventies and, although the end is as invisible as it ever was, my probability of dying in a given year is many times greater than when, as a teenager, I first tried to imagine the extinction of my life, my world, and all those who had shared it with me. My human being is more “begoining” than becoming. As Christopher Hitchens put it, “every day represents more and more subtracted from less and less”.<sup>1</sup> The merely probable “not-yet” is shorter than the definite “no-longer”; and “ago” is increasingly measured in decades rather than years. An optimistic calculation puts the number of days I imagine as “lying ahead” of me between a half and a third of the number that lie behind me: I am somewhere between supper-time and midnight in my life’s day. Since my last phase may be marked by chaos, confusion, pain and despair, the period in which I may be capable, in particular capable of thought, will most probably be even shorter than the quantity of time that remains to me.

This may be why, in certain moods, an ordinary Tuesday can seem, from the ordinary Wednesday that succeeds it, unreachable, beyond recall, in its own special sunlight; a privileged place merely in virtue of owning more of the future than does this present day. The extra day of “being there” becomes a giant stretch when I think of the fewness of my days of “I am” compared with the days of “I am not”, the endless – dateless and data-less – night of my absence which lacks even the quality of darkness.



What's more, the pace seems to be quickening. "I can't believe that a year has gone by since ..." is now replaced by a second order dismay: "I really can't believe a year has gone by since I last said 'I can't believe a year has gone by since ...'". Inflation seems to affect time as surely as it does money. There is an obvious, but probably wrong, explanation for this feeling that the tug towards increasing age is getting stronger; namely that the lengthening contrail of memory makes each successive day a smaller fraction of life so far. This proportionality explanation does not work, of course, because, by the time you were forty, days would be flashing by 80 times as fast as when you were 6 months old. Such an acceleration does not seem to fit with the occasional day that does drag, as when you are ill, listening to the uninvited monologue of a fellow passenger on a long haul flight, or stuck on a slow-moving train late for an appointment.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps the acceleration is due to the diminishing significance or novelty of the events that fills our hours.

Whatever the cause, on each 1 January the number designating the year just past looks less used up than its predecessor. By the time 1960 had arrived, my 1959 was worn out and its replacement overdue. When 2011 was announced, I was still not used to 2010 and even 2009 and 2008 looked scarcely touched. It is hardly surprising that I sometimes feel – as I imagine you, reader, do when yet another day, another week, another summer, another year has melted away – as if I were being swept, log-like, towards a cataract dropping into oblivion.

This feeling of suppressed panic has prompted me to think systematically about time, perhaps in the hope that, by cultivating a special kind of attention to it, I might slow it down or (if the expectation of having such an impact on the universe was unrealistic) slow my own passage to oblivion. An exploration prompted by gathering uneasiness would, you might think, best be addressed through lyric poetry or fiction that endeavours to rescue time lost. I have chosen philosophy not just because the familiar conundrums always yield something new. No; it is because the traditional problems are the visible surface of the invisible mystery of our "time-torn" condition. Granted, it is easy, too easy, to slip from thinking about whatever we have in mind when we feel the need to engage with "time itself" to thinking about the thoughts that others have had about time.

If this is an ever present danger it is because the literature on time – even if you confine yourself to metaphysics and bypass the huge bibliographies on the psychology of time perception, the representation of time in myth, in different cultures, in history, and the various ways time is expressed in narrative – is almost boundless. I am sufficiently aware of the size of that literature to know that no life of normal duration would be adequate to engage with it. And this will be evident in the modest list of references at the end of the book.

In his brilliant *Real Time II*, one of the many books that I have argued with (mainly against) in the last decade or so, D. H. Mellor says that he hopes "that the fewness of my references will not be taken as a sign of ignorance or arrogance"; on the contrary, it is because "I take it that my main points, if disputed, to be so common in the literature as to be by now public property."<sup>3</sup> In my case, arrogance is not an issue; indeed, I am humbled by my awareness of the other failing named by Mellor, namely "ignorance".

Even so, I think I know enough of what is, and has been, thought about time that I can be reasonably sure of not missing the main issues and of not being self-deceived into a fantasy of originality simply because, like Irie in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*, I was unaware that certain thoughts had been "thunk" before.<sup>4</sup> To elect not to engage with the ideas and arguments of other thinkers, advanced in the millennia since time became a central theme of western philosophy, would be a self-impoverishing and self-defeating ordinance that would result not in intellectual independence and novelty but an unwilling dependence on a muddled version of the half-recalled views of predecessors. While much of *Of Time and Lamentation* is closer than it may appear to being an argument with myself than a work of scholarship, I am aware that an argument that has sufficient merit to be worthy of auditing by a third party, must be enriched by engagement with the work done by others in the philosophy of time, even when the engagement is non-systematic and far from comprehensive.

### A first philosophy?

I have written about time as an indirect way of thinking about mortality. If *Of Time and Lamentation*, therefore, has all the appearance of a treatise, and even at places a scholarly one, it is not, as conventional as it appears. Its scope and ambition, for a start, is foolhardy – as befits an attempt to confront my (and your) finitude; of trying to think about a truth that defeats thought because it spans all that I am. Not that the mysteries of time offer an easy approach to otherwise inconceivable mortality: they resist contemplation almost as strongly as death repels it.<sup>5</sup> Most obviously, this is because we seem to have to stand outside of time to be able to see it clearly; to adopt a viewpoint that is not merely outside of some particular inside but outside of all outsides. There is something deeply contradictory about assuming such a position if only because writing, thinking, reading are all located in time.<sup>6</sup>

Of course time-talk is not uniquely disabled in this way.<sup>7</sup> Philosophy is always written in the teeth of its own impossibility if only because it is encircled, and encroached upon, by its objects of study; and the inquiry often rests on the assumptions or materials that are being inspected. Any metaphysical discussion of "Being" has to be conducted by beings, who are minute fragments of Being, the bounded part trying to encompass the boundless whole. The philosophy of language has to be pursued from within language, using words and sentences to rise above words, and examine sentences. Thinkers have to think their way to a position from which they imagine they can think about "thought". Discussions of "the reality of the outside world" have to assume that it is "out there", if only in the form of interlocutors. Anyone who wants to think at a metaphysical level about time – or "consciousness" or "the universe" come to that – therefore faces the Munchausen challenge of lifting one's self by one's own hair. We can sometimes do this, or seem to do so, too easily, commenting in the most automatic even absent-minded, way on, say, "the world", asserting gigantic truths (or falsehoods) in ordinary sentences that hardly have the draught to accommodate the thoughts we echo.

The very existence of the word “time” and the identification of time as a discrete theme for inquiry should therefore surprise us. We should not assume unquestioningly that there is something definite, unified, solid corresponding to a word, even when it has the office of a noun. This assumption does however form a necessary platform from which to launch our inquiry. Here, as elsewhere, to philosophize is to enter a conversation and we have to employ the terms that are used by our interlocutors. Uncertainty about the firmness of this platform, however, explains why the question “(What) Is Time?” is postponed to the final part of the book, where I shall try (among other things) to clarify what remains when we have set aside the almost irresistible metaphors that intervene between our experience of time and our thoughts about it.

Ontology, logic, epistemology have all laid claim to being a starting point for philosophy; and Emmanuel Levinas has even argued that, since responsibility precedes any searching after truth, ethics is the foundational philosophical discipline.<sup>8</sup> Some of the reasons for adding the metaphysics of time to this short list will, I hope, be evident in the chapters that follow. Like any ground floor philosophical inquiry, that into the nature of time reaches into other fundamental philosophical preoccupations – for example, the nature of change, the fundamental stuff of the world, the relationship between discourse and that which it is about, human consciousness (by a long chalk, the most frequent subject of my published philosophical writings), and human freedom. Time entered the history of Western philosophy even before philosophy clearly separated itself from mythology and it has subsequently been a theme of equal concern to philosophers and theologians.

### Physics and philosophy

If thinking about time is an indirect way of meditating on our mortality, then we need to focus on time as it is lived. This means rescuing time from the jaws of physics, one of the primary aims of the present volume – and it connects with the fundamental motivation of many of my other books.

For several decades, I have believed that the great intellectual challenge of contemporary thought is to find a way of thinking about ourselves that does not regress to supernatural beliefs or slip into a reductive naturalism. As part of meeting this challenge, we have to deal with the conflict between on the one hand possibly the most profound, and certainly the most practically effective, ways of thinking about the world in which we pass our lives, namely natural science, and on the other our everyday experience of the world, of ourselves, and of each other – the world in which scientists actually live and the rest of us make use of their findings. Science aims towards the most objective view and arrives at us humans – its starting point – last. The humanities and the arts begin from ourselves and reach out to the world; or at least they have done so in recent times in Western cultures though, historically, they have often skipped the world and reached past it to God. The endeavour to find a place at which the scientific and humanistic views of humanity are