

TIME

A PHILOSOPHICAL TREATMENT

KEITH SEDDON

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Part One

1

Introductory — The Dynamic View of Time

The strange thing about time is that the way people ordinarily think of it is completely wrong — so I intend to show. If we pretend to have access to the secret thoughts of a person of common sense who is thinking about where they have come to in life and where they hope to go we will see the way in which time is mistakenly conceived. This imaginary person is like each and every one of us. Until we do philosophy and start examining the way we think, we all think along very similar lines. All that I have done, my successes and failures, lie in the past, thinks this person. That my failures are receding into the past is not such a bad thing, but how sad it is that the successes, the enjoyable times, must go as well. But not to worry, for there is the future, with its fresh adventures, advancing towards me. All the things that I shall do lie here. Is it not a consoling thought that successes yet to be mine are even now drawing nearer and nearer, until that magic moment comes when they will exist in the present, and I will enjoy what all men take delight in when what I have wanted and planned for will be with me?

We speak this way about our lives and our endeavours all the time. The philosophical interest in this comes when we wonder whether our talk says anything metaphysically correct about time and events. For what we seem to be saying is that time flows, or moves, such that events are constantly changing their position in relation to the present moment: or else it is we who are steadily advancing into the future, experiencing the events in our lives which lie there as we go. We speak of events as though they are 'dynamic' in the one sense as moving through time, either towards us from the future or away from us into the past, and in the second

sense as changing their temporal positions. Both senses are appealed to when it is said that future events become less and less future until they become present, whereafter they pass into the past, and thence recede further and further into the past. Along with the events that change their position relative to the present come the dates at which they occur: 1 January 2001 for instance is constantly drawing closer to us. Soon enough that date will be present. Then it will be a date in recent history; it will move further and further away from the present, deeper and deeper into the past. Eventually it will be a date in ancient history, and our achievements in this present era will have passed away into the dark recesses of the past.

Physical objects are subject to a similar movement through time. Of objects that are no longer with us (such as the original St Paul's Cathedral which was destroyed in the Great Fire of London) it seems natural to say that they have passed into the past, and are receding forever from us along with all past dates and events.

George N. Schlesinger claims that it is a fact of human experience that events flow towards us from the future, are experienced in the present, whereupon they flow on again into the past.¹ Those who adopt this view would point to any number of ordinary-language expressions which reflect our apparent belief that time flows. People say that 'time flies', that 'time rushes by', that the crisis of an illness 'is approaching', and 'the world has passed by' someone; we talk of 'the river of time', of 'advancing through time'; 'it's all water under the bridge now'; 'time has slipped away'; 'tomorrow is still to come'; we 'while away' an hour; 'time creeps by'; 'time marches on'; 'we've lost time'; 'the clock has lost time'; 'I think I can find enough time'; 'where has the time gone?'; time is wasted and spent; sometimes there is 'no more time' (it has all been used up); 'I have plenty of time on my hands'.

In ordinary language, time is discussed in terms of metaphors, many of which bring with them the image of time flowing like a liquid, of time being a sort of stuff that can be stopped up, or spent, or used carelessly. 'Tomorrow is coming, moves in, moves on, is gone, joins yesterday. It will never come by this way again. Time does not stand still. Nor does tomorrow come in, move out, and then rest. It keeps on going and every day it's further away.'² The adherent of the dynamic view of time takes these expressions not really as metaphors at all. They express for him the honest

truth about reality: time flows.

The truth is that we think of time on the model of a flowing river (or perhaps a moving conveyor belt, or a speeding locomotive, or some other image of movement). We are like passengers in a boat drifting down the river. The scenes that pass us are the events in our lives. Behind us, receding upstream, are all our past experiences, now for ever beyond our reach. We cannot even see them any more; they exist for us only in memory. And downstream, ahead of us, lies the future, steadily getting closer and closer. Or if we prefer, we can dispense with the boat and see ourselves standing on a bridge or sitting on a bank beside the river. The twigs and leaves and boats that float past us represent the events that we experience. Upstream is our future, flowing towards us. Downstream is our past.³

Someone, like Schlesinger, who takes this river-of-time model seriously and believes that events really do move through time (in either sense that they pass us, or we pass them), I shall refer to as holding the transient view of time. Time, on this view, is fully dynamic in the two senses already mentioned. Firstly, temporal motion is an objective fact about reality, and secondly, events really do change with respect to being past, present or future (thus, an event now present was once future, and will later be past). It is possible to deny that events are dynamic in the first sense, that is, events do not really move, but still hold that events are dynamic in the second sense, that is, they do change with respect to being past, present and future. Someone who thinks this I will refer to as holding the tensed view of time (it will be clear later why 'tensed view' is a suitable expression). Thus, someone may believe that events really do change with respect to their being past, present or future, yet not cash this change in terms of events moving through time from the future, to the present, and on into the past. Someone who adheres to what I am calling the tensed view of time would find the river-of-time model suspect, and nothing other than a convenient but metaphysically misleading image. This being the case, it does not follow that events do not change in respect to being past, present and future. Thus, a transient theorist would maintain and a tensed theorist deny that our talk about the flow of time and the movement of events is a reliable guide to the claim that events move through time. Both theorists take such talk to be a reliable guide to the claim that events change with respect to being past, present and future. One could deny that events are transient, in the sense that they really move through time, but not

deny that events change with respect to being past, present and future. One could not deny that events change with respect to being past, present and future without also denying that events really move through time. If an event is to move, it must start off being future so that it can move to a temporal position where it is less future, or it must start off being present so that it can move into the past, or it must start off past so that it can move further into the past. If an event cannot change with respect to its being past, present or future, it cannot move in the way the transient theorist holds that all events move.

In Part I of this discussion, I will pause to look more closely at the ways in which our ordinary-language expressions confuse us about the nature of time; I then intend to show that the notion of temporal movement as incorporated into the transient view is incoherent along with a conception of 'the NOW' which Schlesinger employs to defend the transient view. I will then show why I think the tensed view of time is mistaken, arguing that events do not really change with respect to being past, present and future — that events logically resemble objects in space which are not intrinsically 'here' and 'there' but simply related spatially to each other; similarly, events are related temporally to each other, any event being earlier than some other events, and later than some other events, but no event is really past or present or future. I will show what is required for a tensed statement to be true ('E is future' is a tensed statement — these terms will be explained in the proper place), and I will show why it is that no tensed statement can be translated by a tenseless statement (a statement which says how events are related temporally to each other making no reference to the present). I will also make mention of McTaggart's remarks about time and change, disputing with him his claim that change is impossible if time is not tensed (that is, if events do not change with respect to being past, present and future).

Notes

1. 'How Time Flies', which is essentially the same material as Chapter 4 of his book *Metaphysics*. (Full details to references are given in the Bibliography.)

2. O. K. Bouwsma, 'The Mystery of Time (or, The Man Who Did Not Know What Time Is)'.

3. See Donald C. Williams, 'The Myth of Passage' pp. 103 ff. for more on temporal imagery.

2

The Static View of Time

If we wish to deny that time is dynamic and reject the transient and the tensed views of time, we can do this by maintaining the static view of time. On this view, events are ordered by the relation 'earlier than' (or its logical opposite 'later than'); and that events are so ordered is not cashed in terms of the sequence in which events cease being future and become present, and is not cashed in terms of events moving in time. The static view of time holds that there is no moving present, and there is no flow of time. Such notions are simply mistaken. The river-of-time image, although seemingly indispensable when we need to think about ourselves, our lives, our plans for the future and our recollections of what has been, is a fraud, having nothing useful to instruct us about the true nature of time and events. Why we have this image and how it misleads our thought about time will be discussed in the next section.

Events are not intrinsically past, present and future, and they do not change in respect of being past, present and future, despite the fact that we speak of them as if they do. Time is just a matter of relation between events. If event E_1 occurs earlier than event E_2 we express all there is to say about the temporal state of affairs concerning E_1 and E_2 by stating that E_1 is earlier than E_2 . This fact does not consist in any further facts, such as E_1 being future while E_2 is even more future, or E_1 being past while E_2 is future, or E_2 being past and E_1 being even more past; neither does it consist in the fact that E_1 attains presentness before E_2 does. The static view of time denies that there is a present at all, in which case events do not become present. Even though we experience events 'in the present' and talk of experiencing events 'in the present' the events

we refer to when saying these things do not have something which all other events, past and future, lack. Present events have not gained something which future events have yet to acquire, and past events have not lost something which they once had. This view is appropriately called the 'static' view, because it denies that time is dynamic in the two senses already mentioned; that is, it denies that events move from future to past or that we move towards the future, and it denies that events change with respect to being past, present and future.

My aim throughout this discussion will be to object to thinking about time dynamically, and to show that the static view can withstand the objections from the transient and tensed theorists, and constitutes an adequate theory of time.

It ought to be noted before moving on that the temporal relation 'earlier than' is transitive and asymmetric. By transitive we mean that if E_1 is earlier than E_2 and E_2 is earlier than E_3 , E_1 is earlier than E_3 . In general terms we can say that if one particular bears the relation concerned to another particular, and that particular bears the relation to a third particular, then the first particular bears that relation to the third particular. If we experience E_1 before E_2 , and E_2 before E_3 , there is nothing further to experience or find out in order to claim correctly that E_1 is earlier than E_3 . Another example of a transitive relation would be 'heavier than'. The relation 'owes money to' is not transitive. And by 'asymmetric' we mean that if E_1 is earlier than E_2 , then E_2 logically cannot be earlier than E_1 . This is one of those relations, which in general terms, is such that if one particular bears it towards another, that other particular cannot bear it to the first. 'Taller than' is similarly asymmetric. This understanding of 'earlier than' would be disputed by people who think that time is cyclic, that the whole history of the universe, having happened, starts again at the beginning and happens again, and so on. I shall not have occasion to address this strange idea.

3

Ordinary Language and the Nature of Time

J. J. C. Smart remarks that ‘certainly we *feel* that time flows’, but this feeling he believes ‘arises out of metaphysical confusion’,¹ which is what I believe and what I hope to elucidate in the course of this discussion. We feel that time flows because from the beginning when we were small children our acquaintance with time, with things happening, having happened and about to happen was mediated by metaphors of movement and flowing (some of which were noted in Chapter 1). I remember it very well. Events yet to happen were said to be approaching me: the school holidays were approaching, at another time the new school term was approaching; the time for the bandages to be removed from my injured thumb was approaching. I remember being asked at the age of five whether I was looking forward to starting school. I knew a little bit of what went on in school, and when I was asked that question I found myself picturing an image of a classroom with myself in the room — here was a picture of the future, fast approaching; it was like seeing a scene further down a road which when I arrived at that spot I would be involved in. Everywhere there are diaries, calendars and wall-charts, representing time as a ribbon along which we travel. Whenever anyone asks ‘What are you doing next week?’ I see in my mind’s eye that temporal ribbon, neatly divided off into separate days, by means of which I can recall my plans. Part of the answer as to why we feel time flows obviously lies in the fact that to talk about time at all involves talking with spatial metaphors and movement metaphors. The language we have all grown up with dictates a pattern of thought. Even though I now feel convinced that time does not flow, if I think about the past or the future I can do this only by thinking in terms of the river-of-time

image; without the image I could not think about time at all. Since I cannot dispense with the image, all I can do is remind myself that as far as the metaphysical truth about time is concerned, the image is false.

There are three points I want to mention which contribute to an understanding of why we have the sort of temporal language which we do. These are tentative suggestions, and do not say the last word on this difficult question.

Human experience is comprised of a ceaselessly changing panorama of events, what Broad calls 'that series of successive experiences which constitutes one's mental history from the cradle to the grave'.² We are experiencing different things all the time. Even for the man locked away in solitary confinement, his experience will be that of one thought, one image, after another, of different bodily sensations, of successive distant noises. Seeing time in terms of a flowing river seems to be an attempt to explain why it is that our experience is indeed a ceaselessly changing panorama. Here we sit beside the river of time, and the events we experience are brought to us upon the never-ending current. A fixed pattern of events floating upon the river produces for us our ever-changing panorama as the events drift by.

People can remember what has happened, and they can anticipate what is yet to come. I suspect there is a tendency to model remembering and anticipating on ordinary perception. For many people (certainly for me), recalling a past experience very frequently involves having a visual image, and to this extent resembles ordinary seeing. The mistake that can be made is to think of what is remembered or what is anticipated as having a real existence somewhere or other, just as an object perceived is regarded as having a real existence in a perfectly straight forward sense. The difficulty is to understand how a past or future event can have an existence which is different from the existence of an event which is perceived in the present. Thinking in terms of the river of time offers a solution. Present, past, and future events all have essentially the same sort of existence; it's just that those events which are now flowing past us, which we call present, can be directly perceived, whereas past events, still existing in their own right, can only be remembered, and future events can only be anticipated. (We should note that the relation 'downstream of', like 'earlier than', is transitive and asymmetric, making the river image all the easier to assume.) Clearly there is not much of a philosophical theory here. These ideas about the river of time seem

circular and arbitrary. But in so far as the common man thinks about time at all, this, I feel, is the way in which it is done.

Thirdly, and lastly, given that people remember what has happened to them, our experience is that we are forever accumulating a greater and greater stock of memories. We are being filled up by our experiences. People talk of gaining experiences as much as simply having them. That this is how we find our lives makes it easy to 'hypostatise' time (as Smart has put it³); our memories are like vessels into which our ever-changing experiences are poured. It is true that we accumulate, via the faculty of memory, more and more experiences, and the only way we have of representing accumulation to ourselves is to think in terms of vessels being filled.⁴

Schlesinger is very impressed by the fact that 'human beings in widely different cultural settings and in all periods of history have regarded it as one of the most central features of existence that time moves, so that events are carried from the future towards us and then recede further and further into the past'.⁵ He does not say, but I take it that he knows this to be the case by simply noting the way in which people have talked about time. They talked in terms of models such as the river of time, revealing a belief that time moves. This can be conceded. But the observation that people talk as if time flows is no guide to the philosophical truth of the matter. With respect to a deity or deities, we can say again that 'human beings in widely different cultural settings and in all periods of history have regarded it as one of the most central features of existence' that there exists a deity or deities. This claim is probably true, but still leaves undecided the philosophical question as to whether a deity or deities exist. My belief is that Schlesinger sees a wrong importance in the fact that people talk about time as if it moves. For him it indicates that time moves, for me it indicates that Schlesinger, and others, have been too easily taken in by the surface appearance of our language. It is not difficult to see how our temporal language leads us to have mistaken ideas about the nature of time.

In our language we can find groups of sentences which have the same 'surface grammar', the same 'form of expression', but which have a different 'depth grammar'. One of Wittgenstein's main contentions was that philosophical confusion arises in many areas because people have failed to notice this fact of language, and have been misled by similarities of surface grammar; a form of expression misleads because we assimilate it with another expression

which has the same surface grammar. Henry Le Roy Finch sums this up neatly with several apt references to Wittgenstein in his paragraph:

On its surface, grammar is full of similes which create false appearances (PI 112)^[6] and pictures which ‘force themselves on us’ (PI 140, 397) and ‘hold us captive’ (PI 115). It fascinates us with misleading analogies ([*Blue Book* page] 49) and tempts us to misunderstanding and invent myths (PI 109, 345). We try to follow up the analogies which it suggests and we find that they conflict with each other and we get entangled in our own rules (PI 125). Grammar is a snare and a delusion.⁷

Time is particularly prone to this difficulty. Sometimes we speak of the past as if it is a place. The instructions ‘Don’t live in London’ and ‘Don’t live in the past’ have the same surface grammar and give the impression that the past is a location in the way that London is. This is because ‘live in’ has a different depth grammar in either statement. In the first, ‘live in’ refers to someone’s physical location, but in the second statement it refers to the having of a certain outlook or attitude to life. Similarly, the statements ‘I’m putting this book in the bookcase’ and ‘I’m putting that bad experience behind me’ make it look as though putting a bad experience behind one is essentially the same sort of action as putting a book in a bookcase. We know that this is not the case, since the past is not really a place where past experiences, good or bad, have their locations. But the damage is already done. We talk in these terms, and the image of the past as a location has been conjured. Other expressions we use (and there are scores of them) create the false picture of time as a thing which moves. Just as we say ‘The procession is approaching’ we say ‘The exams are approaching.’ The surface grammar of these two statements is the same, but the depth grammar is different because ‘approach’ has got more than one meaning. With regard to any set of statements which share the same surface grammar, we can determine whether they have also the same depth grammar by seeing whether the assumptions which can be properly held and the questions which are appropriate to ask carry over from any particular sample in the set to the other statements. When we look at the statement ‘Don’t live in London’ we can see that it is right to assume that London is a real place, and one can appropriately ask how one may get to