

The Phenomenology of Time and the Retreat of Reason

Richard Davies*
davies@unibg.it

ABSTRACT

The controversy between the *A*- and the *B*-theoretical understandings of the nature of time remains open as a matter of metaphysics, and supporters of either theory can recognise supporters of the other as worthwhile interlocutors in discussions of the philosophy of time. The present article does not seek to present a decisive argument to break this deadlock. Rather, the aim is to contrast the cast of thought expressed in the *B* theory with what appear to be humans' most spontaneous evaluative and emotional engagements with temporal phenomena. In particular, the *B*-theoretic denial that there are any genuine tensed facts calls forth complications to explain motivation in the present, the widespread asymmetries in our attitudes to the past and the future, and the differences that longer or shorter passages of time can make. If (some version of) the *B* theory is true, then many of the biases to which we are given are irrational.

1. SPECIALIST KNOWLEDGE

Over the last century or so, the philosophy of time has taken on some of the characteristics of a specialist discipline. Prominent among these are a certain consensus regarding the canonical texts relative to which new work should be located, as well as the development of vocabularies and formalisms that have taken on technical meanings which are likely to be obscure or misleading to those new to the subject. Naturally, these two characteristics are interrelated. The terminology and symbolisms used in some of the classic texts have continued to exercise a hold over adepts in the philosophy of time and provide useful common ground for carrying forward debates that would be hard to express at all in the absence of some shorthand with agreed – or nearly-agreed – connotations or, in the more fortunate cases, definitions. In this paper, we shall avail ourselves of no more than an indispensable minimum of these technicalities.

We may briskly list the three prime sources to which modern philosophers of time turn for the expressive resources that have been developed since their initial appearance in the first decade of the twentieth century. In the first place, there is the physical theory of spacetime that has grown out of the proposals of Albert Einstein and others to conceive of time as a dimension orthogonal to three spatial dimensions, and as distinguishable from them only relative to an inertial frame of reference. To this, the present notes will make hardly any reference, although the idea of spacetime as a four-dimensional manifold has been snugly incorporated into a theory on which we shall try to throw some fresh doubts. Second, developments in formal logic in the twentieth century have had an enormous impact on how

* Facoltà di Scienze Umanistiche, Università degli Studi di Bergamo.



constructive metaphysics has been – and indeed should be – conducted. Two lines of investigation may be singled out as particularly fruitful for the philosophy of time (as for much else in philosophy). On the one hand, the formalisations of quantification, especially in variants of the notation proposed in Whitehead and Russell's *Principia Mathematica*, have allowed perspicuous and concise expression of existence claims. On the other, the systematisations of intensional logics in the wake of C.I. Lewis' work (itself set on foot in reaction to Whitehead and Russell's pioneering publication) have permitted the symbolic representation of temporal logics of varying topology. Finally, and closest to our present concerns, it is widely agreed that the arguments proposed by John McTaggart Ellis McTaggart to prove the unreality of time are classics that cannot be ignored. More in particular, McTaggart's distinctions among the ways that temporal or apparently temporal series can be conceived have been accepted to such an extent that a reference to, for instance, an 'A series' is instantly recognisable, even if a given philosopher's understanding of what should be meant by it may turn on his or her evaluation of the rest of McTaggart's argumentation. While some other terminological conventions and neologisms may be regarded as more advanced keys in the philosophy of time, someone who is completely in the dark about even one of the foregoing specimens of required background knowledge will have little title to special acquaintance with the subject¹.

One further characteristic of many specialist disciplines that is, however, lacking from the philosophy of time is an underlying agreement not so much about what it is worth debating, as about the basic structure of the object of debate. That this characteristic is lacking in the philosophy of time can be seen by considering the way that there is no consensus, for instance, about the moral (or morals) to be drawn from (or about) McTaggart's arguments against the reality of time. As this is one of the matters on which we shall have more to say, all I intend for the time being is to note *that* the debate on the question goes to the very heart of the philosophy of time and *that* it has not been resolved to general satisfaction among the specialists in the field. Although some jaded commentators on the scene might infer that there is something deeply misguided about a discipline that cannot identify its own object's basic traits and hence that perhaps all the technicalities that have been developed are premature and even a cause of the *impasse*, we shall proceed on the assumption that the philosophy of time is properly philosophical in pretty much the following sense: a person's adoption of one or other of the positions expressible with the linguistic and logical machinery that has been made available over the last century or so may genuinely be setting out a view of the nature of reality that is not wholly amenable to technical determination. To put the point more crudely: intuitions about what, after all, time *is* may not lend themselves to knock-down proof or disproof by means of even the most sophisticated of specialist tools.

¹ If this is fair, then so is the claim that, among others, Henri Bergson and Martin Heidegger did not contribute to the philosophy of time. If the contributions of relativity theory, formal logic and McTaggart's distinctions are allowed to be optional to the philosophy of time in and after the twentieth century, then we may reserve the right to designate a field of study, say, the 'philosophy of schmime', that does operate a basic competence bar of the sort envisaged and say that the philosophy of schmime is the object of present comment.



Yet another characteristic often found in the possessors of specialist knowledge is the ability to do things that non-specialists do not think of doing or are unable to do. By contrast, impressionistic encounters with a fair number of professional philosophers of time yield two observations that may seem a first glance merely silly. One is that these experts are not noticeably better or worse than other people at dealing with what happens in time: they are not noticeably more or less punctual, or more or less accurate in estimating the passage of ten minutes, for instance. The other is that, in similar practical affairs, the supporters of one theory in the philosophy of time have no perceptible advantage over the supporters of another; indeed, they all seem to act and, more important for present purposes, react to what happens in the course of their lives in much the same way as the rest of us do.

While the former of these impressions may not be particularly surprising, I shall try to make a case for thinking that the latter should cause a little bit more perplexity than it actually does. In particular, I shall propose that the theorists who take time to be constituted fundamentally of a *B* series *should* cultivate a set of attitudes to and evaluations of temporal phenomena rather different from the sort of emotional architecture that at once is probably the most widespread in humans and also more naturally explained – but perhaps not justified – on an *A*-series view. This is not quite the claim that those *B*-theorists who remain indifferent to the pastness or futurity and to the recentness and imminence of events that affect them are the only ones who are honest about the theory that they espouse². Rather, the thought to be investigated is that a wholehearted endorsement of a *B*-series view sits ill with – even if it is not strictly inconsistent with – a set of propensities that come unbidden to most human beings.

In particular, the propensities we shall be most concerned with may be called ‘biases’ and, in the next section, (2), we shall review some of the ways that biases of partiality or perspective may lead to irrationality in contexts that are not specifically temporal. In section (3) we shall offer some thoughts about the overall cast of mind involved in acceptance of a *B* theory and the priority it attributes to the characteristics of spatial dimensions in modelling the basic traits of time. We shall then, in sections (4), (5) and (6) consider various temporal biases to which a *B*-theorist should be immune, but that seem to be at least as widespread among these experts as they are among not only their more or less expert interlocutors who conceive time in *A*-series terms, but also in the population at large.

Although I hope that some of the instances to be considered provide some relatively unexamined material for assessing widespread positions among experts in the philosophy of time, I should stress at the outset two disavowals relative to the proposal made here. On the one hand, I do not hope to give anything like a direct proof that an *A*-series conception of time is the ultimate truth of the core dispute in the philosophy of time. Even though I believe that it is and fear that some of my comments may seem simply to assume that it is, I allow that the question is still a bone of legitimate philosophical contention. The present aim is rather to alert *B*-theorists to some tensions that their position in the philosophy of time sets up against the background of what it is reasonable to expect are their ethical and emotional orientations. The

² This I take to be a pretty direct corollary of the thesis espoused by David Cockburn in (Cockburn, 1997) and (Cockburn, 1998).



other disavowal regards originality: beginning with my title, I signal the inspiration I have derived from Ingmar Persson's important book *The Retreat of Reason*³. Because Persson is inclined to think that a *B*-conception is the ultimate truth of the matter in the philosophy of time⁴, it is entirely to his credit that he struggles with such perspicacity and honesty against the threat that many of our temporal biases lead us into irrationality. The interested reader is strongly recommended to read or re-read this gripping book for a more systematic and far-reaching account of the problem than the coming few pages can hope to offer.

2. BIASES: KLUGES, HOBBY-HORSES AND STANDPOINTS

In order to have some points of reference for establishing various types of propensity that can affect the arising of moral and emotional attitudes, it is worth making some effort to distinguish, at least in a rough-and-ready way, the sources and effects of at least three types of bias. Though they are surely not exhaustive nor clearly exclusive, it may be helpful to outline the categories indicated in the present section heading.

The word '*kluge*' (pronounced to rhyme with 'huge') has been adopted in some areas of computing science and of evolutionary theory to indicate an imperfect, clumsy or inelegant design feature⁵. In a variety of environments, a *kluge* may be acceptable so long as the resultant product – whether it be hardware, software or an organism – enjoys some overall advantage relative to its competitors. But, as a sort of unhappy exaptation⁶, a *kluge* carries with it a cost. Thus, for instance, the fact that human beings stand on two feet offers the advantage of allowing us to use our forepaws to manipulate tools more effectively, but there is a cost to be paid in the form of back pain (lumbago, sciatica, slipped discs and the rest), given that the single undulating spine we are stuck with is structurally unfit to bear the loads put on it. Because no one designed the human body, no one is to blame; but the *kluge* is there for all to see or undergo.

Though we shall return to some specifically temporal *kluges* in subsequent sections, it is worth illustrating what we may call 'cognitive *kluges*' by considering an asymmetry that is deeply rooted in our judgments of behaviour according to whether we are agents or observers. It is a fact about the way we are made up that, when we explain our own actions, we tend to appeal to the situation in which we find ourselves, whereas when we account for what others do, we tend to refer to their character traits or dispositions⁷. The divergent evaluations that follow from the different causal categories invoked in the two cases make it easier for us to forgive ourselves an error, because we see our own behaviour as a rational response to circumstance, while it is less pressing for us to do the same for others.

³ (Persson, 2005).

⁴ (Persson, 2005), pp. 201-4

⁵ For pronunciation and history of the word, as well as application of the concept to human cognitive resources, see (Marcus, 2008).

⁶ See (Gould, 2002), pp. 1229-49.

⁷ A classic experiment to bring out this discrepancy is described in (Nisbett, 1973).



It is not to our present purpose to speculate on the adaptive value of such an asymmetry; yet one might easily and perhaps plausibly think that a feature of this sort helps us to preserve at least a modicum of self-esteem in the face of our miserable fallibility. But it looks like a cognitive kluge because, in many social situations, it can easily lead us not to understand how other agents thought they were acting; more especially, in more casual encounters, such as those among motorists, self-justification is rife and road rage not unknown ('I had an urgent appointment, but the other driver was just being a selfish road-hog'). What is more to our point is that the agent/observer distortion is utterly general and thoroughly ingrained: it takes at least a moment's reflection on each occasion not to fall into the trap or even to notice when we have fallen into it.

While the first-/third-person asymmetry in the attribution process represents an unwilling egoism, some of the biases that we may call '*hobby-horses*' can be forms of more-or-less chosen, but often partial, altruism. For instance, on a sketchy account of love that defines that disposition as a readiness to place the loved one's interests on a par with one's own, we might say that, instead of situating oneself as the sole centre of the lived universe, there are two major foci of one's concern. In the most cheering cases of this phenomenon, we can even detect some overcoming of the kluge just outlined: one takes the loved one's behaviour at their own estimate, rather than at that of an observer. In more aberrant cases, which nevertheless share the same structure and thus justify the choice of the label '*hobby-horse*' for the whole class, the object of altruistic concern may even be unknown to the carer, as we see with Mrs Jellyby's dedication to the natives of Borrioboola-Gha at the expense of her family. But, whether cheering or aberrant, these hobby-horses still fall far short of taking the whole range of sentient creatures into account as utilitarians require, or even of extending our attention to all (but also only) members of the species *homo sapiens sapiens* as Kantians think fit. According to those two popular doctrines, any preferential treatment should be regarded as a bias that prevents us from making sound ethical judgments.

In their turn, both utilitarianism, understood as the promotion of some good in certain distributions but regardless of the identities of the beneficiaries, and Kantianism, understood as impartiality in the application of the moral law, can be regarded as hobby-horses. For both can be regarded not merely as willed but even as wilful efforts to correct each human's strong propensity to favour themselves over others. That is, while the altruisms of love and of charity are obviously arbitrary, it is not obvious that the stipulation of universalisability is not also arbitrary in its own way, given that no human being has ever been able to adopt such a posture for more than a few minutes, and then only in the tranquillity of the philosophy room. That is to say, to say that one should, in Hutcheson's formula, promote the greatest happiness of the greatest number or, in one of Kant's versions, act as if the maxim of one's action were to become through one's will a universal law, is one thing; actually to try to carry it out would be a sign of severe mental disorder, given what human beings are like, and specifically how little information they can process about the interests of others.

Let us grant the incoherence of ethical egoism in the following adequately precise sense. No one can justify, either to themselves or to others, that they should be the sole object of concern for themselves and for others merely in virtue of being who they are: the mere fact of



being who they are is insufficient to establish what we might call their moral priority. That I am who I am and that you are who you are, are pretty clearly facts of some sort, but neither gives either me or you grounds for giving moral priority to one or to the other. Nevertheless, I have a certain *standpoint* on my own affairs that you do not have and you have a certain standpoint on yours that I do not have.⁸ In this sense, I care about what I want, what I want promoted, and how it seems best to promote it in a way that you, as a matter of fact, do not; and I am sure that you have similar cares for yourself. Moreover, I have information about my cares that you do not have. For this reason, I can give an instrumental account of why sometimes it is better that I should put through my projects than have them carried out by others on my behalf. For instance, I do not want others to do my shopping for me and I would be uncertain in doing the shopping for others, at least in the absence of a pretty detailed shopping list they had made up for me.

If it is the case, as is most likely, that neither any form of utilitarianism nor any form of Kantianism is the whole story to be told about the conditions for acceptably motivated action, then it may be that there is some fact about my being me that makes it acceptable for me to promote my interests, and sometimes to do so at the expense of others. But such a fact will pretty certainly not be particularly persuasive to others; my own priority *for me* is not generalisable because it is rooted in my standpoint. And if there is some such fact about another person that makes it acceptable for them to pursue their goals to my detriment, it is not likely to have much motivational force for me.

Standpoints, such mine on my being myself, are pretty close to ineradicable from human beings. Indeed, one might say that an individual who sought to eliminate their own interests from their reckoning about how to act in favour of a total submission to the preferences of another would be, at the very least, incapable of flourishing, if for no other reason than their ignorance of the other's desires and hence perpetual uncertainty about what to do. The early phases of childcare have this feature, but they are thankfully temporary. On the other hand, if someone else took my agenda as determinative of what they should do, I would very quickly find such slavishness an intolerable burden on me, and I certainly would not want the company of such a person: I could hardly treat them as a human being.

In the following sections, we shall use this rough-and-ready taxonomy of kluges, hobby-horses and standpoints to see which of the cognitive and emotional biases that humans most commonly display are most likely to generate tensions for specialists in the philosophy of time, and especially for those of a *B*-theoretic bent.

3. HAD I WORLD ENOUGH AND TIME

The underlying thrust of a *B*-theoretic conception of time encourages us to think of various times as capable of being laid out in front of us in such a way that, just as we can see various

⁸ Although the word 'standpoint' carries some moribund metaphorical freight from the idea of the occupation of a location in space, it is at least less weighed down than the alternative 'perspective', which smuggles also the idea of perceptual access to other locations.



places as equally real though each of us occupies just one of them, we can grasp that times other than the present are equally real. This tendency – not unlike that of the ethical theories of Kant and Mill – is towards abstraction. Like those ethical theories, it is a tendency that should help to promote or at least to identify rationality in the long run (when we have a long run), because even the fairly distant future is seen to count as much as the present. Conceived in this way, the temptation is overwhelming to represent temporality by means of a spatial axis, even if it is one with an arrow attached to it. Yet the presence of an arrow does not stop one looking at a page on which a timeline is drawn and thinking that right-to-left is as good as left-to-right. Even those philosophers, of whatever persuasion relative to McTaggart's basic distinction, who deny the possibility of (especially backward) time travel, find themselves virtually forced to speak of 'locations' and 'positions' in time to and from which one may or may not 'move', as one moves from one place to another in space. This manner of speaking may in its turn have encouraged, and have been encouraged by, the idea that spatial and temporal dimensions should be treated as ultimately isomorphic, at least in the sense that the separation between two events in spacetime can be assigned a constant physical quantity under transformations of frame of reference.

Though it may be that no philosopher has enunciated an *ensemble* of opinions with exactly the emphasis just indicated⁹, it is nevertheless impressive how the various elements hang together and form a coherent view of things. This coherence may of itself speak in favour of the underlying ideology. Thus, it may be impossible to tell whether a given philosopher who embraces the *B* series does so because of a preference for the abstract, because of the ease of representation on a piece of paper or because of its apparently more intuitive coherence with our best physical theory, or whether, vice-versa, his refusal to privilege the present, his readiness to draw an axis – with or without arrows – to represent time, and his willingness to think of before-and-after as a variant (relative to some frame of reference) on up-and-down, back-and-forth and left-and-right derive from his acceptance of a *B*-series view. And so on with the other permutations. Although there may be, with regard to any particular philosopher a psychological or biographical order in which such commitments grow, it is not clear that any one of the elements has clear conceptual priority relative to the others.

There are at least three important disanalogies between our notions of space and of time that nevertheless speak in favour of the tendency to deploy spatial vocabulary for the description of time. They speak in favour of that assimilation because they concern ways in which space presents itself as less problematic or mysterious than time, and thus can be mobilised to help us understand time by taming it. After all, St Augustine did not say '*si non rogas, intelligo*' about space.

One disanalogy, to which we have already alluded, is that we can take in places other than the one we occupy by means of perception and are thus disinclined to make ontological discriminations among them in the way that our access by means of only non-perceptual cognition (memory and imagination) to the past and the future encourages us to think of them

⁹ A cursory reading of (Le Poidevin, 2003), gives the impression that its author may be such a philosopher, though he says virtually nothing about relativity physics. I do not know what impression a properly attentive reading would give.



as having a different status from what we are currently experiencing. The *B*-theoretic response to this is to say that the partiality that *A*-theorists sometimes show in admitting the reality of the distant in space while at least hedging the reality of the distant in time (especially the future) is unwarranted. Unless we are to apply double standards on the basis of the nature of our experience, we should treat times much as we do places.

A second difference between our theorisations of space and of time arises from the fact that while much of the best geometry can be done without making measurements, e.g. in inches with a ruler, but rather by mobilizing variables, chronometry can hardly get started without the establishment of some unit of time-lapse, whether it be the movement of the celestial bodies or the cooking of rice. This difference might suggest that our perception of duration is somehow derivative from the notion of repetition, whereas that of extension is, so to say, purer and more exact. The moral might thus be drawn that we should abstract the passage of time from its measurement and that this can be done by thinking of it as a fourth dimension is many ways similar to the three spatial ones.

Perhaps the most important apparent disanalogy between 'here' and 'now' arises from the way that the place I happen to occupy at any given moment, and hence the view I have on my environment, is pretty radically contingent: I could have been somewhere else and seen things from another angle. Even though the vocabulary of 'standpoints' used in the last section to express my unsheddable me-ness bears the imprint of a spatial metaphor, we should bear in mind that human beings have some control over their position in space in a way that they do not over who they are or what the time is. It may be that, if human beings had not been mobile, they could not have grasped the basic conception of space that seems to be common in all known cultures, on which change of place is in one way or another taken for granted. If, for instance, we had been as stationary as plants are, we might have found ourselves with a notion of our spatial standpoint more similar to that of our self. Where *B*-theorists want to assimilate 'now' to 'here', some *A*-theorists might think of 'now' as functioning more like 'I': it imposes a standpoint, albeit one that, unlike 'I', is always changing. For an *A*-theorist, the now I am in at any given time is given to me in much the same way that my being me is not a matter I can do anything about. But for the *B*-theorist the idea that one can have a standpoint that is both permanent, because we always experience only the present, and yet transitory, because the present does not last, constitutes a mystery that needs to be resolved. And the apparently easiest resolution is to deny that what is fleeting is really real. This is a point to which we shall return, but we may note that this aspect of the *B*-theoretical spatialising of time may account for a greater receptiveness – or a lesser impatience – among some (but by no means all) of its proponents towards the notion of time travel.

Even supposing that treating time as in some respects on a par with the spatial dimensions were as straightforward as it appears to many *B*-theorists, we are not out of the woods. For, even if we do not suppose ourselves to have, properly speaking, any standpoints as regards space, there remains a range of kluges and hobby-horses that invest our interactions with the dispositions of objects in space. If the tendency to represent the lapse of time as a linear distance is meant to make time more amenable to representation and measurement, we may be overestimating how even-handed we are about places and the sizes of things in them.



Consider, for instance, the temporal kluge well represented by the saying that time flies when you're having fun (i.e. and doesn't when you're waiting for the number 53 bus in the rain). This is a matter of subjective measurement, in which time apparently elapses at different rates according to what you're up to: a clocked hour of fun *seems* to last as long as ten minutes at the bus stop. Though we can correct our estimates by looking at our watches, we may remain slightly incredulous that we have made such a mistake, and may even be inclined to suspect that some trick has been pulled on us. It might be suggested that there is a pretty good spatial analogue to this kluge in the effect of the Müller-Lyer illusion: a person challenged to see the two lines that are of equal length *as* of equal length will fail just as predictably as one challenged to compare lapses of fun and soggy bus-awaiting. If what holds of the Müller-Lyer, and of innumerable other perceptologists' inventions, should be expressed by saying that, in such cases, we cannot believe our eyes, then it is not obvious that estimates of spatial length should be taken as regulative of how we judge the passage of time. In both cases, we are subject to systematic and predictable error.

Again, consider the naturalness of saying that I met the same person in the same place when I ran into her in the corner shop yesterday morning and this morning. While it is true that I met her at the same part of the surface of the Earth, this part of the surface of the Earth was not at all in the same place, what with all the spinning around that astronomers have been telling us about over the last few hundred years. Though this kluge can be circumvented on certain occasions, perhaps for the purposes of making a joke or confusing one's interlocutor, the apparent fixity of the surface of the Earth is hard to give up. Short of taking to a spaceship, the Earth always figures in our spatial reference frame. Likewise, it is very hard for human beings to account spans of interstellar space as made up of lengths that are simple multiples of my present distance from the corner shop. Perhaps some astrophysicists are able, so to speak, to think in light-years or in parsecs, but it is more common to find enormous distances represented as proportions among small objects ('if the Sun were the size of a pumpkin ...')¹⁰. And it is a point of common observation that it is almost impossible to see a sunset as a rotation of the Earth (but that is a kluge to do rather with relative motion than with relative size).

In addition to the kluges that feed visual illusions and to the partiality that keeps human beings particularly attached to the surface to the Earth, there are indefinitely many spatial hobby-horses that different people nourish regarding particular parts of that surface, often starting with the claim that there's no place like home – wherever that may be. Some of these investments of emotional, religious or economic value may be more or less readily admitted to

¹⁰ The sort of view that I take to be the default position from which one may begin philosophising is eloquently expressed in a well-known passage by F.P. Ramsey:

My picture of the world is drawn in perspective, and not like a model to scale. The foreground is occupied by human beings and the stars are all as small a threepenny bits. I don't really believe in astronomy, except as a complicated description of part of the course of human and possibly animal sensation. I apply my perspective not merely to space but also to time. In time the world will cool and everything will die; but that is a long time off still, and its present value at compound discount is almost nothing.

'Epilogue' in (Ramsey, 1990), p. 249.



be artificial, conventional or arbitrary, but they none the less make up part of our geography and affect our judgments of size; particularly to be prized by non-New Yorkers is the world viewed in self-conscious perspective on a famous cover of *The New Yorker*, in which Central Park dwarfs Europe.

The point of citing this sprinkling of instances is this: while we have fair confidence that a minimum of geometry or of the wielding of measuring rods will suffice to correct distortions in the perception of space, the feeling is abroad that a rather more energetic and elaborate intervention is called for to bring impartiality to our apprehensions about time. Moreover, if we are to discipline our temporal biases, the most effective way to do it may be by thinking of series of instants in the same manner in which we distribute points on a line. Whether or not, as a point of psychology, this is the best way to promote inter-temporal rationality I do not profess to know; but what does seem to be the case, as a point of philosophy, is that the representation of time as just another axis in a coordinate system carries with it a series of puzzles about how to explain the ways that human beings, as a matter of fact, face up to what happens as time passes.

4. PUNCTUALITY IS THE POLITENESS OF PRINCES

Though it has been expressed in a variety of more technical ways, the key negative claim of the *B*-series theory can be put as follows: there are no tensed facts. To this claim and to its negation (namely the claim that there are tensed facts) almost all the rest of the elaborations, problems, solutions, proposals and counterproposals in the philosophy of time are related with a certain rigour.

When a *B*-theorist elaborates his basic thesis that there are no tensed facts, he generally means that sentences such as ‘it is raining’, ‘we had fun’, and ‘it’ll be dark before morning’ stand in need of two sorts of treatment before they can be regarded as expressing facts. The first level of treatment requires an application of some distinction between types and tokens. Considered as a sentence-type, ‘it is raining’ certainly does not express a fact in quite the way that some sentence-types, such as those expressing logical and mathematical truths, may. This is because it is only on those occasions that a token of the type is uttered that we can begin to assess it for truth on those occasions. In particular, a token of the type ‘it is raining’, if uttered when it is raining in the vicinity of the utterance (i.e. at the 53 stop), will express a fact and, if uttered when it is not raining, will not. So the second level of treatment called for aims to elucidate what is meant by ‘if uttered when’. Roughly speaking, two lines have been taken by various *B*-theorists (and, in at least one case, by the same theorist at different times¹¹) to explain what this means. According to one view – the ‘token-reflexive’ view – a token of the type ‘it is raining’ expresses a fact if that token is simultaneous with an occasion on which it is

¹¹ I have in mind the views expressed in the two versions of Hugh Mellor’s admirable summations of *B*-theories in his (Mellor, 1981) and (Mellor, 1998). I remain indebted to Prof. Mellor, whose Cambridge lectures on time, delivered in academic year 1981-2 and based on the former book, first pricked my interest in the topic.



raining. Likewise with ‘we had fun’, if uttered after an occasion on which we have fun, and with ‘it’ll be dark before morning’ if uttered before an occasion on which it is dark before morning. On the other view – the ‘date analysis’ –, a token of the type ‘it is raining’ expresses a fact if, for some time t , the token is uttered at t and it is raining at t .

Whether a *B*-theorist inclines towards the token-reflexive view or the date analysis, it is clear that he sees some sort of problem to be solved regarding tokens of sentences whose ruling verb (‘is raining’, ‘had fun’, ‘ll be dark’¹²) is tensed. The solutions are proposed to respond, that is, to some sense in which a token of ‘it is raining’ is incomplete when it is uttered. The aim therefore is to find some conditions whereby the fact expressed by ‘it is raining’ when it is raining can be pinned down once and for all. Such conditions will individuate what some people like to call the truthmaker for a given token of the type. That is to say, the *B*-theorist has a propensity towards the idea that a fact is only really a fact if it is eternally a fact. If this is what lies behind the elaborations such as the token-reflexive view and the date analysis, then we might think that what we have here is a hobby-horse – a prejudice, so to say, in favour of what holds for all times.

A tenseless view of time tends to be the sort of philosophical theory that one can only hold for brief periods and only when one has no business to dispatch. For the dispatch of business requires us to privilege whatever time is the time at which we have to dispatch it, that is to say in the now of its dispatch. Yet, the *B*-theorist’s denial that there are tensed facts will lead him to say that there is no tenseless fact about when now is. While the *B*-theorist will tend to say that the lack of any time that is always the present means that there is no fact about nowness, the *A*-theorist will want to say that, at any given time, there is a time that it is (and, if you want to know which it is, look at your watch or ask a policeman).

This is not to say that *B*-theorists have *no* way of explaining how a person can be punctual or act in a timely manner, coordinating the sequence of events in his environment with the sequence of the actions that he performs. For instance, they can deploy the token-reflexive analysis and observe that, if a certain token of ‘it is time for the television news’ is simultaneous with its being time for the television news, then the belief that that is so, when it is so, can help explain why a person puts the television on at the right time to see the news, rather than too soon or too late. Similarly, on the date analysis, the temporal coincidence between a token of ‘it is time for the television news’ and its being nine o’clock can likewise be called in aid of action explanation. An *A*-theorist is inclined to suspect that such explanations invert the conceptual order, treating more or less technical notions of simultaneity and potentially complex systems of time measurement as more primitive than the fact of time’s being experienced in a series of nows. But the point is that a *B*-theorist is stuck with having to conceive of her relation with the present as somehow mediated, and as involving at least one belief (namely ‘it is time for the television news’) that does not have a genuine – tenseless – truthmaker. The *B*-theorist has to allow that he has and acts on a belief that is not fully true,

¹² We may leave to one side the fact that, in English, futurity is expressed with two (differently differentiated – hence the ‘ll’ formulation, to avoid making invidious distinctions among English English, American English, Australian English and Scottish-or-Canadian English) modal verbs plus infinitive, and therefore does not constitute a tense properly so-called.



because there is no fact for it to latch onto. For, the 'is' in 'it is time for the television news' is clearly present-tensed insofar as it is almost redundant to add a 'now'.

No-one really wants to deny the motivational difference between saying 'if I want to see the news, I should put the television on at nine o'clock' and saying 'if I want to see the news, I should put the television on now'¹³. Yet, for the former to get him to put the television on, the *B*-theorist must somehow acknowledge a feature of his predicament that does not seem to register anywhere among the truthmakers he recognises, namely, that, albeit fleetingly, it is now nine o'clock. Furthermore, given the way that the *B*-theory accentuates and formalises the tendency to think of the history of the universe as a sort of four-dimensional block within which spatial and temporal relations among events are fixed, it also seems that 'if I want to see the news, I should put the television on' carries with it the menace that, unless I do something about the television's coming on, I shall miss the news: my putting it on will make it the case – which it might not have been otherwise – that I see the news. Of the two basic options open to me now (seeing the news or not), I do something that realises one rather than the other. In thus acknowledging the causal efficacy of my manipulation of the 'on' button, I have to allow that something that was not previously a fact (the television's being on when the news is) is now a fact. Yet, I cannot be said to have caused to be the case something that was already going to be the case, which seems to be a direct consequence of the tenselessness of the genuine truthmakers acknowledged on the *B*-theory.

Human beings are, on the whole, most interested in what is happening to them and in what they are doing in the present. Other sentient creatures with which we are acquainted are considerably more now-centred than we are, having little thought for the past and perhaps just a little more for the future. Our capacity, up to a certain point and with a certain degree of abstractness, to think of what happens to us and of what we do in a longer temporal perspective is a peculiarity that allows us to go in for forms of learning and planning that have few parallels in the biosystem of which we are part. But it also leads to a temptation – which arises precisely out of a propensity to favour abstractions when we are in the philosophy room – to try to extend our interest from the near past and the near future to ever-longer lapses of time. Once we begin succumb to this temptation, it is hard to draw a line and say that, beyond a certain point, the far past and the far future are of no account.

Having started the process of expanding our temporal horizons, it becomes easier to suppose that there is such a thing as a 'complete description of reality'¹⁴, possession of which would, in one way or another, answer all our questions. In this direction, there arise a set of fantasies, some of which have been with us for a good while and are held in good repute, according to which there is a point of view on the temporal series that is not itself temporal, and that can grasp the whole history of the universe in all its detail from beginning to end in a

¹³ On the token-reflexive account, the *B*-theoretic formulation would have to be 'if I want to see the news, I should put the television on simultaneous with this token of "if I want to see the news, I should put the television on"', where that token is uttered (spoken, thought) at the same time as the start of the television news.

¹⁴ The phrase is Dummett's: (Dummett, 1960), pp. 356-7.



single instant¹⁵, or that such a complete description is somehow already in place, conceived perhaps as a book or (more recently) as a film or computer programme, whose conclusion is already fixed though we have not yet got to it¹⁶. Though the fatalist implications of such fantasies are sometimes recognised and resisted by conscientious *B*-theorists¹⁷, it is hard to see how someone who does not think that they can make any difference to the complete description can regard their own actions as their own or as making a difference to what will come about next.

A person who was really committed to treating all times as equally important in determining how things stand and how to act would also find it hard to avoid a pretty overwhelming sense of his own insignificance in the grand scheme of things. There is an interesting instability about how one might express this. On the one hand, the *B*-theorist might say that the standpoint of the present gives too much weight to what happens, from time to time, to be our perspective on what is going on. On the other, there is the sense that if we try to ‘put things in perspective’, we get swallowed up by the big picture¹⁸.

The hobby-horse of trying to be even-handed with respect to the various times that may ultimately (i.e. at the end of time, if there will be one) figure in a complete description of reality may be no more and no less arbitrary than utilitarian or Kantian claims about what rationality demands in ethics. We may allow that it is rather less arbitrary than a range of more partial hobby-horses, such as a fixation with a certain past time, as may happen with some extreme forms of nostalgia or with the misfortune of Alzheimer’s, or with a certain future time, whether this be the reaching of pensionable age or the Second Coming. Moreover, it is considerably easier to understand than a sort of partiality that Parfit mentions, according to which a person may be indifferent to what happens to them on future Tuesdays¹⁹. Nevertheless, it is a hard theory to maintain in the face of the way in which, one after another, our experiences come to us as irreducibly present at the time they come to us.

Just as my being me is inescapable for me, so its now being the time it is does not leave me much choice about which time to give most of my attention to. I privilege what I am now doing (writing some notes on the philosophy of time) because this is my present task.

Before proceeding to consider two other areas in which a *B*-theoretic understanding of the basic structure of time can generate tensions with some of our most deep-seated mental habits and emotional attachments, we may as well admit that, insofar as the denial that there

¹⁵ Boethius, *Consolatio Philosophiæ*, V; St Thomas Aquinas, *De Veritate*, II, xii.

¹⁶ As an expression of the former genre, Voltaire’s *Zadig* provides an example of the idea of a ‘book of destiny’; of the latter, in the Wachowski brothers’ *Matrix*, the inexorable running of the computer’s programme makes the world within the *Matrix* fatalist. It is an interesting feature of the non-representability of the fatalist thesis that films, such as *Sliding Doors* or *Final Destination*, in which alternative stories are presented and that therefore negate the thesis, are thought to thematise it. *Casablanca*, by contrast, which has only one way out for Rick and Ilsa, is a meditation on contingency and human choice.

¹⁷ E.g. (Oaklander, 1998).

¹⁸ This is the point of the Total Perspective Vortex in *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*: no-one – apart from the intolerably arrogant Zephod Beeblebrox – can contemplate their own insignificance with equanimity. On related phenomena, see (Persson, 2005), pp. 224-31.

¹⁹ (Parfit, 1984), pp. 123-6, elaborated by Persson in (Persson, 2005), pp. 197-200.



are any tensed facts is an effort to overcome partiality towards the present, it should tend to counteract some cognitive kluges, such as those that trap us into overestimating the importance of what happens to be going on at the present or of what we are planning to do in the near future. Let us give an instance of such a trap.

There is at least one fairly easily recognised kluge that a *B*-series stance should help to overcome. This is the tendency to misreckon how much time it will take us to perform a given task, such as writing a paper on the philosophy of time. In accordance with the attribution kluge, if I fail to meet the deadline, then I attribute my failure to force of circumstance (diligent lecture preparation, meetings and other commitments), whereas if I observe someone else's failure, then it is that person being their usual, boringly disorganised, self. In what has come to be known as 'the planning fallacy', humans tend to underestimate the likelihood of unexpected obstacles to their putting through their business. Hence, if one thinks of what lies ahead as no different from what is present, this propensity should be, as we have said, put in perspective. That is, we should think that things will always take longer than we expect, because we are not very adept at expecting the unexpected²⁰. An epicycle to this kluge is 'Hofstadter's Law', which states that it always takes longer than you expect, even when you take account of Hofstadter's Law²¹. As already indicated, however, impressionistic encounters with experts in the philosophy of time do not furnish strong empirical grounds for thinking that those who embrace the *B*-series are more immune to this kluge than anyone else is, even though, by rights, they should be.

5. FRAMING A FEARFUL ASYMMETRY

McTaggart first published his argument against the reality of time in *Mind* for 1908 and he proposed a version of it in Book V, chapter xxxiii of the *Nature of Existence*, the second volume of which appeared posthumous in 1927 under the editorship of C.D. Broad²².

Most *B*-theorists adopt the position that they do because they take it (a^B) that McTaggart did show that there arises on an *A* series a regress that is both infinite and vicious; and (b^B) that McTaggart's strictures on the inadequacy of the *B* series to account for genuine change are inconclusive to show that time cannot be real if there is only a *B* series. Conversely, most *A*-theorists adopt the position they do because they take it (a^A) that McTaggart did show how a regress can be generated from an *A* series, but that, even if it is infinite, it is not vicious; and (b^A) that McTaggart's strictures on the inadequacy of the *B* series to account for genuine change do show that time cannot be real if there is only a *B* series. McTaggart believed his arguments sufficient to persuade us of (a^B) and (b^A), but he has not had many takers over the last century or so²³; and few, if any, have been interested in exploring the combination of (a^A)

²⁰ These are the future-tense expressions of Secretary Rumsfeld's 'unknown unknowns'.

²¹ (Hofstadter, 1979), p. 152.

²² (McTaggart, 1908) and (McTaggart, 1921/7).

²³ McTaggart himself repeatedly refers to the number of philosophers who have rejected the reality of time as a consideration in favour of taking the possibility seriously. He cites Spinoza, Kant, Hegel and Bradley ((McTaggart, 1921/7), §304) and 'many philosophers, from Descartes to the present day'



with (b^B), probably because it is common ground that, if time is real, one or other of the series that McTaggart distinguished must be more fundamental than the other²⁴.

Though V, xxxiii is the doubtless the best-known chapter of the *Nature of Existence*, we wish to draw attention to an argument that McTaggart presents near the beginning of Book VII ('Practical Consequences'), in chapter lix. Holding firm to (a^B), McTaggart nevertheless thinks it worthwhile to investigate the characteristics of ostensible or merely apparent temporality, and invokes what he calls a *C* series, 'which is not a time series, but under certain conditions appears to us to be one'.²⁵ What McTaggart thinks are the basic characteristics of a *C* series are pretty much what most *A*-theorists think are the basic characteristics of an *A* series. The two most basic characteristics that McTaggart attributes to a *C* series and that *A*-theorists attribute to an *A* series are (i) that it appears to have a 'fundamental sense'; and (ii) that it does not have more than one 'fundamental sense'; where a 'fundamental sense' is understood to be an ordering relation of the members of the series that 'expresses the nature of the series more adequately' than its converse does.²⁶ Since the 'earlier than' relation more adequately expresses the direction of (apparent) change than the 'later than' relation does, McTaggart proposes that the fundamental sense of a *C* series is from what (apparently) causes to what is (apparently) caused²⁷. That is, a *C* series can appear to be a time series because it is asymmetric.

One asymmetry of an apparently temporal *C* series that McTaggart draws our attention to is the 'undisputed fact that anticipation of future good or evil affects our happiness or unhappiness in the present far more than the memory of past good or evil'.²⁸ To bring out this undisputed fact, he compares the cases of two persons *G* and *H*, where *G* is looking back on ten years of intense misery and looking forward to ten years of happiness, while *H* anticipates ten years of intense misery and remembers ten years of happiness.²⁹ Though *G* and *H* are contemplating the same amounts of misery and happiness over the full twenty-year period, 'it is obvious', says McTaggart³⁰, that, at the moment of contemplating them, *G* will be happier than *H*. The indisputability and obviousness of this difference has to do with the indisputability and obviousness of the difference between, on a *C* series, the appearances of the future and the appearances of the past or, on an *A* series (i.e. granting the reality of time), between the future and the past. A *B*-theorist seems to be put in the position of having to say either that

(McTaggart (1921/7), §692), among whom he further specifies Schopenhauer ((McTaggart, 1908), p. 457). I take it that the reference to Descartes should be read as 'from the time of Descartes' because, even if McTaggart believed that Descartes denied the reality of time, Descartes' position on the question of whether there is real temporal becoming seems to have been that there is (though it is at every instant dependent on divine re-creation).

²⁴ Cf. (McTaggart, 1921/7), §306

²⁵ (McTaggart, 1921/7), §347.

²⁶ (McTaggart, 1921/7), §698.

²⁷ Cf. (McTaggart, 1921/7), §218.

²⁸ (McTaggart, 1921/7), §701.

²⁹ It is worth stressing, what McTaggart does not, that this thought-experiment depends on each of *G* and *H* having what each considers for himself experiences that cause happiness and misery: the contents of the experiences may differ according to *G*'s and *H*'s own preferences, tastes, projects &c..

³⁰ (McTaggart, 1921/7), §701.



what is an indisputable and obvious fact is a mere appearance or that there is something deeply irrational in the differences of attitude between *G* and *H*. Or, of course, both. Let us look at these options.

The *B*-theoretic denial that there are any tensed facts leads not only to the denial that, at any given time, there is a (genuine) fact about what time it is, but also to the denial that the monadic determinations ‘past’ and ‘future’ can appear without temporal indexing in the expression of any (genuine) fact. Even if a *C* series has a fundamental sense of the sort McTaggart proposes, a *B*-theorist should regard that sense as a matter of mere appearance: insofar as there are no real causal relations among the fixed facts of the *B* series, the appearance of a fundamental sense set up in a *C* series is ultimately illusory. As a consequence, the difference that everyone else makes between remembering and anticipating is also an artefact of some sort, one that is not to be trusted as a guide to what is past and what is future at any given time.

If this is what the *B*-theorist has in mind, we may allow that, given that he is impressed by arguments in favour of (a^B), then some sort of scepticism about temporal appearances may be his best line. That is, if the *A*-series does generate a vicious infinite regress, then our confidence about distinguishing between memory and expectation may be undermined. But, as so often in philosophy, one man’s *modus ponendo ponens* is another man’s *modus tollendo tollens*. For some *A*-theorists, it may be enough to say that we can know that the regress that can arise from an *A* series is not vicious because we can, at least often enough and in a general sort of way, know that we are recalling something that happened in the past rather than imagining something that has yet to happen, and vice-versa. Of course, there are occasions on which we are mistaken about such things; but most *A*-theorists would want to say that such errors are about how to classify particular beliefs within a classification that is solid enough (from one moment to the next).

If the *B*-theorist persists with his scepticism, we may either ignore him or use the usual tools that we use on first-year undergraduates who get excited about the madmen, dreamers and the Demon in Descartes’ *Meditations* I. One of these rather blunt instruments is to make an appointment with him yesterday – or indeed the day before – to talk about the problem in more depth, which also leaves us the option of ignoring him. The well-known fact that, with most interesting forms of scepticism, the sceptic cannot live in strict accordance with his professed doctrine, may have a sobering effect as a reminder that, once outside the philosophy room, we do set considerable store by the difference between past and future, thinking of the former as an object of memory and of the latter as an object of expectation.

On the other hand, a *B*-theorist may admit the difference between the positions of *G* and *H*, and try to cast it in *B*-theoretic terms, using for instance the token-reflexivity of the monadic temporal determinations. Even so, he might insist that the difference between what is earlier and what is later *should* not make the difference it makes to the degrees of happiness of *G* and *H* as they contemplate their respective conditions. In making this move, he may be motivated by what we have already called his even-handedness about times. Let us suppose this *B*-theorist also to be some sort of utilitarian. Let us then ask him whether it would be indifferent for him to be *G* or *H*. The only consistent response he should give is that, indeed, at least as



regards the twenty years around the moment that is the object of choice, there are equal amounts of happiness and misery for each. Hence, he would have to say that it would not be particularly rational to prefer the position of *G*, who has just exited from misery and faces happiness, to that of *H*, who will have no more happiness but only misery from now on.

I have tried, in various encounters with experts in the philosophy of time, to elicit a response to what I have come to think of as ‘the indifference question’. It seems, however, that I have been unable to formulate the question with sufficient clarity to follow the answers I have received. So I am not in a position to be sure whether the answer I have suggested as the only one that is consistent with the theory of a *B*-inclined utilitarian is the one that many or most *B*-theorists (utilitarian or other) would actually subscribe to. But, as already indicated, Ingmar Persson is one philosopher who has thought bravely about the matter, and, although he does not quote the McTaggart case, his view seems tantamount to an admission that it is a ‘cognitively irrational’³¹ bias in favour of the future that would make us prefer the position of *G* to that of *H*. If what a utilitarian is interested in is maximising benefit and there is no difference in the total benefits accruing to *G* and *H*, then it is not rational to prefer the position of one to that of the other. On that ground, Persson thinks that we would be more rational if we could divest ourselves of the bias that distorts our judgment in favour of this preference. He does not infer directly that it would be *better* for us to be without this bias³², but only that, *if* rationality were our best strategy for living satisfactorily – a hypothesis on which Persson’s work as a whole throws serious doubt –, then extirpating the bias might help us to make better choices.

One sort of consideration that Persson and McTaggart converge on as possibly relevant to the most widespread bias or preference in such cases has to do with the vividness of our cognitions in the two directions along the ostensible temporal sequence. Despite the greater importance we attribute to the future, they are open to the thought that we nevertheless find it harder to envisage it with full determinacy or liveliness. As a result, they conclude, rightly I think, that cognitive vividness can hardly be the deciding factor determining our preference for *G*’s condition. In particular, because McTaggart does not acknowledge the reality of the becoming of which the ostensibly temporal *C* series is an appearance, he doubts that any reason can be assigned for preferring the position of *G* to that of *H*, but he thinks that this is the preference that all of us do, as a matter of fact, harbour, and that in doing so we are not being unreasonable or going contrary to reason.³³ If they adopted our terminology, Persson and McTaggart would nevertheless say that the differences in importance we give to the future and to the past are kluges or hobby-horses.

For anyone who does not deny the reality of *A* series, this is all distinctly odd. My standpoint on what is going to happen to me for the next ten years is different from that on what has happened to me in the last ten years *because* the former is now future and the latter is now past. As a creature in time, it is an abstraction for me to try to view my present position in the sequence of the events that, once I am dead, will have made up my life as if what comes

³¹ (Persson, 2005), p. 216.

³² (Persson, 2005), pp. 217-9.

³³ (McTaggart, 1921/7), §702.



next makes no difference. I want my next experience to be a happy one because this is the point I am now at. And the one after likewise, because that will be next. This has to do with the nature of wanting. Though more or less revealing cases of wanting directed at the past can no doubt be constructed, most of what they reveal is this: that the object of wanting is centrally in or for the present or the future. In many instances, my wanting something to be the case can move me to (try to) bring it about that it is so. As I cannot bring it about that the past be different from what it was, it is vain (because too late) for me to want to.

Whereas McTaggart's case of *G* and *H* concerns, so to speak, the thinly rational motivation of what may boil down to a preference, it is intimately hooked into a wide range of thicker attitudes, emotions and reactions that make essential reference to the difference between past and future. If there really is no choosing between the positions of *G* and *H*, then we would have to give up, for instance, the differences between, on the one hand, fear and apprehension, which are directed at the present and for the future, and, on the other, remorse and regret, which cannot but have past acts and omissions as their objects. These states might be regarded as tense-sensitive species of some genus like dread, and a convinced *B*-theorist might say that it is misleading to distinguish them. But what would it be to 'give up' such distinctions? And how are we 'misled' by them? And if we are misled in the case of *G* and *H*, are we not also subject to some sort of irrationality in all those attitudinal and emotive states that demand some inherently tense-relative orientation? Wouldn't these include at least boredom, agitation, disillusion, hope, relief, triumph, disappointment, gratitude, apprehension, impatience, discouragement, dismay, resignation, pity, forgiveness and vengefulness (to name but a few and in no particular order³⁴)? Which of them can be regarded as consequences of kluges that we have to live with and work round, and which arise from hobby-horses that we root out by patient self-training? Is the whole of our emotional life nothing but a congeries of indefensibly irrational biases, of hobby-horses and of kluges that we should try to overcome by cultivating a stern indifference to the appearances of tense?

To these rhetorical questions, a good Stoic would, on general grounds, give the unsought answer. On the whole, though, we find that philosophers of time are little inclined to any so radical and strenuous programme of personal reorientation (at least no more and no less so than any other kind of person). In particular, we would expect that *B*-theorists would, if given the choice, definitely prefer the position of *G* to that of *H* because they are not so insensitive to the temporal directions in which their various feelings point as their theory, at least *prima facie*, tells them is rational. For them, however, the mere order in which things happens *should* not be of any consequence. By contrast, an *A*-series understanding of time is more consonant with the perceived asymmetry in the attitudes that almost all humans do, in point of

³⁴ To the best of my knowledge, only relief has generated its own literature, in the wake of (Prior, 1959). I thank an anonymous commentator for this journal for signalling (Maclaurin and Dyke, 2002), who note that relief is 'unrepresentative of past-directed emotions' (p. 286). Both the Prior and the Maclaurin-Dyke papers are included (along with four other contributions to the *topos* that has come to be known as 'Prior's "thank goodness that's over" problem') in Vol. III of ((Oaklander, 2008) pp. 7-12 and 35-51 respectively).



undisputed and obvious fact, adopt towards what was and what is to be. This does not of itself mean that (a^A) is the truth of the matter. But it does mean that it is easier to live with.

6. SOONER OR LATER

Our rough-and-ready distinctions among kluges, hobby-horses and standpoints begins to look pretty inadequate when we come to consider the different weightings that we give to proximity and remoteness in time. For it is hard to tell which deviations from temporal impartiality we should count as hardwired, which as corrigible and which as simply reasonable. The most crashingly obvious fact is that, both with regard to the past and with regard to the future, those times closest to the present at any given time are invested with an importance that can equal or even exceed that attributed to the present itself. Given that a *B*-theorist is already committed to denying that there is any genuine fact about presentness that is not relativised either to the time or date of utterance, *a fortiori*, he will deny that there are any genuine facts about nearness-to-the-present.

There are of course some time-sensitive behaviours that a *B*-theorist can model perfectly well, such as the widespread preference for immediate gratification in conditions of uncertainty. Even a fairly thin theory of rationality can explain why, if you are offered a gratuity of €1,000 today or €1,100 to be paid a week from today, you may find yourself in such doubt about the stability of so untoward a proposal (only cranky psychologists make such offers), about the inflation rate (think Germany, 1923) or even about your survival over the next seven days (a point to which we shall return), that waiting a week for the extra €100 may not be worth it. Some problems of reasonable choice and the countervailing kluges and hobby-horses here depend on how the uncertainties are framed or presented as salient and do not particularly concern theses in the philosophy of time. It is nevertheless interesting that the tendency to take the money today is associated, so we are told³⁵, with activation of the limbic system, while that to delay in order to maximise gain in the long(ish) run is elaborated in the prefrontal cortex, a part of the brain much more developed in humans than in other animals. In general, it is thought that when the prefrontal cortex has the better of it, agents are acting more rationally.

The discounting of the present that allows us to take a longer view is at least a wink to the way that *B*-theories treat all times as being on a par. But, even so, if any reasonably naturalistic theory of the origin and destiny of human beings is plausible, then one might be forgiven for thinking that the only times we should ever really care about fall at least close to the sequence that runs from a little bit before the time of our birth to some fairly short time after the time of our death, and that all others are really objects of merely hobby-horse interest³⁶. Rather than get embroiled in the anthropological and religious questions such an assertion raises, let us

³⁵ E.g. by (McLure, 2004).

³⁶ An eloquent and articulated exposition of advanced Epicurean thought on these matters can be found in the chapter of (Tsouna, 2007) dedicated to reconstructing the remnants of Book IV of the *De Morte* (pp. 239-311).



turn our attention to a few, admittedly extreme, cases in which our perspective on the lapse of time does seem to make a difference.

Consider the two utterances ‘my father died yesterday’ and ‘my father died fifteen years ago’. While the former elicits the sympathy of a friend of a normally filial speaker, the latter need not. It would take a hard heart to deny the former fellow-feeling, and exceptional circumstances to think condolences still in order in response to the latter. Among such exceptional circumstances would be those in which the speaker learnt only yesterday that he had, unbeknownst to him, been an orphan for the last fifteen years: a hole will have opened up in his life that previously he thought was filled. In such a case, the sense of loss might, in some measure, be mitigated by the father’s absence from the speaker’s life in the intervening years.³⁷

Consider, then, a *B*-theoretic rendering of our two utterances. According to favoured formalism, both might come out as ‘for some person α , and for some time t , the father of α died at t' or similar. This seems to be the only genuine fact in the case and it is common to what happened yesterday and to what happened fifteen years ago. The tendency of such a rendering will be towards saying that, insofar as the quantified analysis exhausts the (genuine) facts about the paternal death, there is no particular reason to respond in different ways to each. If, then, sympathy is in order in the case of ‘my father died yesterday’, it should be also in the case of ‘my father died fifteen years ago’. But this is clearly not so; hence the *B*-analysis has left something out. Naturally, using the machinery of token-reflexiveness or the date analysis, it is possible to render some sense of the relation between that fact and what is going on when the tensed utterances are proffered. The point, however, is that this machinery has to *work* to explain how the mere fact of the death’s being at a certain time or date can make the difference.

Proceeding from announcements about the past to pronouncements about the future, but keeping to the macabre, we may recall a sequence from near the end of Luis Buñuel’s *Le fantôme de la liberté* in which an urban sniper is apprehended by the police and sent to trial. Found guilty of having picked off a number of passers-by, he is condemned to death. So he walks free from the courtroom, as mortal as he was when he entered it. Whatever else one thinks about capital punishment, if a death sentence is to have any force, it had better not be of the *B*-theoretic form ‘for some time t , you die at t' , which is true of us all’³⁸. Rather, it has to have the effect of bringing it home (a) that, between now and your death, the time is short; (b) that its date may already be (artificially) fixed; and (c) that you cannot occupy yourself with any fresh project before execution.

As regards (a), we may suppose that anyone who is indifferent to how soon they will die or who cannot really conceive of their own death, is in some way avoiding the nature of the human predicament. It is hard to think of anything more pathetic – and more indicative of

³⁷ Again, within the exceptional circumstance, only exceptional circumstances, such as a forged correspondence from the father to the son, would reinstate the sense that the son has undergone recent bereavement, to which is superadded the shock of discovery of the fraud.

³⁸ John Maynard Keynes was wont to observe that, ‘in the long run, we are all dead’; quoted in (Pigou, 1946), p. 13.



their level of understanding of what they face – than the fact that many prisoners condemned to capital punishment in the United States leave a favoured part of their last meal ‘for later’³⁹. As regards (b), we may also, if we are catholic in our cinematic tastes, recall not just the anger of the androids in *Bladerunner* at knowing that their creators made them with a built-in expiry date, but also their overpowering desire to know in advance when they are destined to die. That is to say, they want access to the content of their ‘death sentence’, knowing that this is already determined; what makes their position different from that of most of us, is that there is something more definite than the Biblical ‘three score years and ten’ to be known. And as regards (c), we may contrast the position of a prisoner on death row, who is not permitted to do anything but await execution, with that of a terminally ill person who is ‘given six months to live’ and consequently tries to ‘live life to the full’. When an apprehension of imminent death is borne in on us, we may change strategy and no longer live for the long run, but permit ourselves, so to speak, to be governed by the limbic system rather than the prefrontal cortex⁴⁰. And this is itself a piece of rationality.

Given that there is always some level of uncertainty about how much time we have left, there will always be some level of bias towards the nearer future that will be rational. Often enough, though, this standpoint is over-accentuated as a result of hobby-horses and kluges of varying degrees of insidiousness that prevent us giving due weight to our own future states, which in due course will become our present states and will cause us to rue our earlier improvidence. Even if it is the case that my now smoking a cigarette makes it more likely that I will die of lung cancer, my attention to my present desire satisfactions and the consequent indistinctness of my future self in an oxygen tent mean that I act irrationally if I assume a long run. That is, I can abstractly apprehend a longer run than I find myself able to act on, given my craving for nicotine.

The point of illustrating some of these tense-sensitive attitudes with the dramatic cases of the last few paragraphs is this: they inescapably carry some emotional tone that seems to get less than fully captured by a *B*-theoretic analysis of time. To put the point a little more strongly: a *B* theory has to do something to *explain* such phenomena in a way that an *A* theory doesn’t because the essentially perspectival nature of our engagement with time is written into the primacy attributed to tense.

³⁹ Among others, the unjustly famous Willie Horton is reported to have done just this. Boswell quotes Johnson as having said, to turn aside suspicion that, because of its vigorous rhetoric, he and not the convicted Dr Dodds was the author of the pamphlet *The Convict’s Address* attributed to Dodds, ‘Depend upon it, Sir, when a man knows he is to be hanged in a fortnight, it concentrates his mind wonderfully’ ((Boswell, 1791), II, p. 127 (19th September 1777)).

⁴⁰ Cf. Dorothy Parker’s acute reminder:

Drink and dance and laugh and lie,
Love, the reeling midnight through.
For tomorrow we shall die!
(But, alas, we never do.)
(Parker, 1977) p. 298.



7. WHEN ALL IS SAID AND DONE

Supposing I were to become convinced, listening perhaps to a paper by Nathan Oaklander or reading yet another book by Robin Le Poidevin, that some version of the *B*-theoretic understanding is, after all, the truth of the matter in the philosophy of time, are there any opinions, propensities or biases that I now have that I should change in order to keep abreast of theoretical enlightenment? If so, which? What should replace them? And what might motivate such a change?

To respond briefly to these questions, we may distinguish between those motivations that make essential reference to what we might call the representational adequacy of my view of things and thus have to do with rationality in some narrow sense, as against those that are guided by what makes it make sense for me to live my life as a finite and mortal creature and thus have to do with the satisfactoriness for me of my world view.

If representational adequacy were the dominant motivation, I would have to deny that my commitment to finishing these notes before the deadline is any more my present business than is finishing the construction of the Great Pyramid (to take another example from McTaggart⁴¹) or observing next month's eclipse of the Sun (to take a future contingent that seems real enough by now). In place of my current sense of urgency, I could cultivate the serene thought that either the paper will be finished or it won't: the fact – whichever it is – is fixed. I would not be more concerned about my future states of well-being or of suffering than I am at present about the things I have enjoyed and undergone in the past. Yesterday's visit to the dentist would impinge on me no more and no less than tomorrow's. Yesterday and tomorrow would not crowd in on me any more than do the Big Bang and the heat death of the universe. All these partialities would have to go.

If liveability were my maxim, I would not feel inclined to change my priorities or my perspective one jot or tittle. I would have accepted a thesis – 'there are no tensed facts', or some more complex variant on it – as a claim to defend in the philosophy room and would leave it at that. Within the severe limits of my philosophical ingenuity, I would have adopted a piece of specialist knowledge and been none the wiser for it.

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⁴¹ (McTaggart, 1921/7) §309.



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