

Book Review

Time and Realism

Y. Dolev
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Andrea Borghini*
aborghin@holycross.edu

Time and Realism is a courageous book. With a clear prose and neatly woven arguments, Dolev takes the reader through two different, although related endeavors. The first (Chapters 1-4) is an assessment of the two major conceptions of time – the so-called *tensed* and *tenseless* views; the finale of this part avers that both views, in their different versions, play against serious challenges. The second and more ambitious endeavor (Chapters 5 and 6) argues that these challenges can be ‘transcended’ (to use Dolev’s own expression) and, hence, that philosophy can be liberated from old burdens such as explaining time’s passage, or what time is, or why the future appears as open.

In this review I will first point out two desirable theoretical distinctions that are missing throughout the volume and from which I believe Dolev’s study would have substantially benefited. I will then discuss two aspects of the second, more inventive endeavor. It should be stressed, however, that the first four chapters contains original sections too, such as §3.2, a rather meticulous discussion of Dummett’s antirealist conception of tensed propositions, and §4.3, a discussion of Mellor’s tenseless view.

Time and Realism looks into lasting philosophical conundrums that arise when we ponder the nature of time. At the core of the investigation lies the distinction between a tensed and a tenseless view of time— distinction which is, eventually, rejected by Dolev. Roughly, tensed theorists maintain that any vindication of what there is, is given within a certain temporal perspective, which breaks away time in a past, a present, and a future; thus, our world is such that Napoleon *was* exiled in St Helena between October 1815 and May 1821. Tenseless theorists, on the other hand, give a description of reality which is a-temporal: whether a subject regards a certain event as being – say – past is not constitutive of what the event is; thus, our world is such that Napoleon *is* exiled in St Helena between October 1815 and May 1821 (where ‘is’ has to be read a-temporally, as when we say that “The set of equilateral triangles is the set of equiangular triangles”). The opposition between the tensed and the tenseless view is essentially a semantic opposition: it interests the way in which a statement is true – whether it is true a-temporally or relatively to a certain time.

Still, when it comes to the metaphysics of time, there are at least two more distinctions that typically play a relevant theoretical role. One involves so-called three- and four-dimensionalism. Roughly, the first holds that a material object is wholly present at each instant at which it exists. So, for example, on October 20, 1815, at 11:34am Napoleon is wholly

* Department of Philosophy - College of the Holy Cross 1 College Street 01610 Worcester MA U.S.A.



present. Four-dimensionalists, on the other hand, maintain that a material object is only partially present at each instant at which it exists: on October 20, 1815, at 11:34am a ‘temporal slice’ of Napoleon is present, not the whole Napoleon. Three- and four-dimensionalism, thus, aim at providing a metaphysical account of the persistence of material objects through time. (There are other theoretical options, such as the so-called stage-view, that I am here omitting for the sake of space.)

Contenders in the other distinction are the so-called presentists and eternalists. Those defending the first view claim that only present entities exist; so, literally speaking, ‘the exile of Napoleon’ is an empty description, although there may be at present entities whose existence is explained also in terms of such a description. On the other side of the spectrum, eternalists claim that past, present, and future entities all exist; thus, the exile of Napoleon is real as much as the fact that you are reading this words right now. (I’m omitting here, again for the sake of space, other intermediate positions, such as the so-called growing universe view, according to which only the past and the present exist, but not the future.)

Time and Realism does not make use of the three- vs four-dimensionalist nor of the presentist vs eternalist oppositions; no mention is made of the first one, while the second is quoted on p.6, where it is regarded as equivalent to the tensed vs tenseless opposition. This absence renders the conceptual articulation of the book wanting in a number of places. For example, much of the discussion in Chapter 4 on the emergence of an ontology of time would benefit from the introduction of both distinctions (especially the discussion of Mellor’s view, §4.3); or, the examination of Dummett’s position (§3.2) would be more transparent, if Dummett were more explicitly characterized as a presentist. More generally, the sole use of a semantic distinction (tensed vs tenseless) throughout the volume strikes as peculiar, considering that the book deals with ontological accounts of time.

Let us now move to consider Chapters 5 and 6, where Dolev lays out his most original material. It is here that he purports to show that the major ontological issues on the nature of time can be ‘transcended’. With this expression Dolev expresses an attitude, proper also of the late Wittgenstein, according to which the philosophical conundrums that arise when we persevere for longer than usual our ordinary worldview can be dissolved; and the role of the philosopher is precisely to show how this can be done. Thus, the key to transcend the ontological issues on the nature of time lies in realizing that “tense cannot be cast in ontological terms.” (p. 114) This conviction is arrived at after a meticulous examination of the tensed and tenseless views, both of which – it is argued – cannot provide a satisfactory explanation of time’s passage (among other issues).

Whether Dolev’s assessment of these views is accurate I shall leave open. What strikes as particularly challenging is his tentative of dissolution of the ontological issues on the nature of time. Having to select some portions of it, I will concentrate, in order, on his alleged dissolution of two problems: of the duration of the present moment (§5.1) and of the presence of experience (§5.2). Other problems for which he tries to account are: the fact that remembered experiences appear as past (§5.3); the flow of time (§5.4); the tensed character of first-person experience (§5.5); the apparent openness of the future (§5.6); and the implications of Relativity Theory on our conception of time (§5.7).



How long is the present moment? On his way to reply this question, Dolev at first notices that there is “a striking discrepancy between the philosopher’s vanishing present and the apparent temporal voluminousness of present events and states of affairs.” (p. 118) Building on this remark, he then argues that this old and vexed question becomes problematic only once we start presuming (as the typical philosopher does) that there has to be *one* specific duration which constitutes *the* answer to such question.

It is unclear, however, whether Dolev provides sufficient ground upon which to rest his argument. He brings forward two points that are, allegedly, in his favor; but neither of them seems tenable. The first is an appeal to the reader’s intuitions: “it seems evident to me that there is nothing wrong with speaking, say, of the hockey game – as opposed to some “instantaneous parts” of the game – as present event.” (p. 118) With this I might agree, if it were not for the fact that it is also evident to me that there is nothing wrong with speaking, say, of the hockey game as *being partially gone and partially yet to be done*, thus implying that only a tiny fraction of it is present; this strikes me as the way in which most players, the coach and many spectators probably conceive of the game in order to make the most of it. Thus, which conception one ought to favor is unclear and it seems that one could contemplate both at once.

The second point hinges on an analogy between the adverbs ‘here’ and ‘now’:

It is evident that “here” is not pointlike, that by asserting that she is here, in New York, Dana does not mean that the whole of New York is somehow here, inside her room. But then why would anyone have thought that by asserting that the game is now in progress, one might have meant that the entire game, all three periods of it, are being played now, at this very instant? (p. 120)

The analogy between space and time, is, however, not always a fitting one. At least phenomenally, the reasons why ‘here’ differs from ‘now’ are readily pointed out: while we are able to *perceive* extended regions of space, we are not able to perceive extended (or, at least: comparatively extended) regions of time; we may *conceive* of the latter and thus speak of them, and perhaps we may use our adverbs as referring to what we are conceiving; but, in their most crudely acquaintance-related character, ‘here’ and ‘now’ differ substantially. Thus, Dolev’s argument aiming at dissolving the problem of the duration of the present is found wanting. The suspicion is that, in order to pin down a solution to it, one would have to revert to some kind of ontological explanation– the one that Dolev is trying to avoid.

Let us now move to consider the problem of the presence of experience. In order to dissolve it, Dolev brings in an analogy with §50 and §279 of Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations* (see pp. 132-136). There Wittgenstein argues that an entity cannot be the measure of itself; thus, for example, of the standard meter which is in Paris one cannot say that it is or that it is not a meter long. Along the same lines, for Dolev, “an experience’s presence is like *S*’s meterhood: it is a ghost of a phenomenon, not something in relation to which the idea of an explanation, or an account, can be given in any sense.” (p. 136) That an experience is present works as a standard for sorting out what is past, what is co-present, and what is future; but, of the experience itself, it does not make sense to say that it is or that it is



not present. Indeed, “we certainly do not establish that *e* is present by *comparing* its temporal location with that of some other event.” (p. 137)

Dolev’s point is well-taken only if to establish what is present in one’s experience turns out to be just a business of setting a standard, like when we have to measure the length of an object. However, one could argue that the presence of experience is deeply rooted in a *self-conscious realization of being alive* (as, for example, authors such as Sartre or Heidegger did). It is not accidental, one could note, that we speak of ‘the presence of experience’ but not of ‘the length of experience’ (with reference to the portion of space one is experiencing); indeed, the former is a concept which is constitutive of being a person, while the latter is not. Thus, when Mary says of her experience that it is present, she is saying something meaningful: roughly, that through such an experience she *realizes that she is alive*. And, if this is the case, then the analogy with Wittgenstein’s line of argument is dispersed, and with it the alleged dissolution of the problem of the present experience.