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Time

Once firewood turns to ash, the ash cannot revert to being firewood. But you should not take the view that it is ashes afterward and firewood before. You should realise that although firewood is at the dharma-stage of firewood, and that this is possessed of before and after, the firewood is at the same time independent, completely cut off from before, completely cut off from after.

Dōgen Zenji, 1231–53₁

1. Time in and out of the framework

The framework provides time with a significance determined by our projects. For our projects have goals and a goal is a projected future; once I have a type of future in mind, the significance of my present is to work towards it. So, for instance, in a busy day of work I aim to finish the document, have a quick lunch, be at the meeting at two o'clock, then work on the other document before leaving in time to collect the children. While I am working, my projected future makes sense of my present and recent activity. But also presupposed is the more distant future I aim to bring about by achieving all my tasks for the day; my understanding of this future presupposes a more distant past explaining why I want to spend my days like this; and my understanding of this past presupposes a still more distant projected future, such as my receiving promotion. And so on back and forth between various past decisions and projected futures, however incompletely I may recall or envisage them. In short, my understanding of any particular time within the framework presupposes a whole network of times, the significance of which is determined by my projects. In accordance with my progress on these projects, I understand my time as well-spent or wasted.

In providing times with significances in terms of projects, the framework conditions our experience of time, and hence how we think of it. Suppose, for instance, that I begin to worry that I am not going to finish in time; I feel flustered and it seems that time is passing too quickly. So I decide to skip lunch, and with a new, more distant future now in mind, the phenomenon fades – now I will have time. Or suppose I am stuck at a busy T-junction; there is an apparently endless stream of traffic and a line of cars has backed up behind me. I feel impatient and it seems I have been waiting for ages; although when I finally get out I realize it was only a couple of minutes. Or

imagine a woman who has been the victim of crime, and has spent two traumatic years trying to bring the perpetrator to justice. She finally succeeds and is now waiting for the jury to reach their verdict; the framework goal of attaining justice has dominated her life and now there is nothing to do but wait. The jury takes about an hour; but this hour will seem 'like an eternity'.

In all these cases, we see how the framework determines our experience of time as flowing towards the future. We find it flowing too quickly if our efforts are insufficient to bring about a projected future; a different and unwanted future approaches before we have time to bring about the desired one. And we find it flowing too slowly when we have only one future in mind and there is nothing we can do to bring it about. Measuring our progress can affect this sense of flow; when I can check off how much of the document I have written against a clock, then if I am not making enough progress it will typically seem that time is moving too quickly. But when there is no progress to measure, it will typically seem that time is moving too slowly. For in the latter kind of case, the significance of my present does not change, as it does between when I am half-way through the document and almost at the end; this lack of change removes my sense of the present evolving into the future. When everything is going as per plan, however, and I am steadily bringing about my projected future – or when my goal is not pressing – then I may hardly notice the time pass. It flows at an appropriate speed that requires no attention. And when I do once more pay attention I may find that it has 'flowed'.

In addition to our understanding of time as something which flows quickly or slowly, we also have a more objective conception of time which developed in order to better coordinate our framework activities. Thus according to Norbert Elias, the concept of time first arose when human groups established a relationship 'between two or more continua of changes, one of which is used as a frame of reference or standard of measurement for the other (or others)'. This might be as simple as using hunger as a cue that it is time to eat, and tiredness as a cue that it is time to sleep.² Social coordination, however, required the selection of a publically observable frame of reference; a group might decide to work together for as long as a certain cloud is visible, for instance. This would be a poor choice for a frame of reference, however, because the amount of work completed would vary depending on weather conditions, and so more reliable continua of change were alighted upon, most definitively the movements across the sky of the sun and moon.

As more precise continua were discovered, and subsequently created with the advent of horological inventions such as the pendulum, our concept of time was able to become more detached from the framework. For conceived in terms of the steady ticking of a clock, time could be experienced not as flowing towards a goal, but rather as something which moves ever onwards with complete indifference to our concerns. Ideas about the rate at which time flows could then be thought to pertain only to how time appears to people fixated upon their projects, rather than what it actually is, with time itself now conceived as an independently existing feature of the world; as 'intrinsically a free-floating sequence of nows' which is 'simply there', as Heidegger puts it.³ For Heidegger, this transition encourages a kind of mistake, and we shall return to this idea in the next section. But our present concern is with how

the development of the concept away from the framework led us to regard time as a philosophical problem.⁴

Now when our engagement with the framework is suspended, we no longer experience time as flowing towards a goal. In this condition, we are able to view our goals more objectively as options chosen within a meaningless life. And reflection on time adds to this sense of nihilism, for while we no longer experience time moving towards a goal, we can nevertheless recognize that it is steadily pressing onwards; not towards our goals, but indefinitely into the future. And since objective time does not culminate at any particular future, but just keeps on going, we cannot regard it as culminating in an overall purpose. So unlike in the framework – where we can experience time flowing towards any number of different futures – we find it moving only towards a single future that serves no purpose.

This kind of detached reflection is liable to make time seem threatening. For when we think of time moving inexorably into a meaningless future, we see that it will move past even our most distant goals, on towards death, then onwards still. As such, time appears as a threat – before which we are powerless – to almost everything we care about. People we care about will die, our looks, abilities, pleasures and enthusiasm will fade, our children will grow up and leave us (or else we will wish they would), and no matter what goals we achieve, time will continue straight past them and on towards death, probably preceded by illness; and that is pretty much a best-case scenario. Defence mechanisms have been developed, such as aiming for a glorious or philosophical death – since death cannot rob you of what you care for if death itself is what you care for. Alternatively we may focus on our posthumous legacy. But although we may indeed care about these things, there is inevitably much more that time will rob us of in the interim. Of course we may care for less in life as we get older, and developmental psychologists tell us it is healthy to displace our cares onto others as we do.⁵ But this is just a product of the threat lessening as it progressively materializes; and even if we displace our cares onto others, time remains a threat to them.

When we step back from the framework to reflect on time, then, we see that it is not moving towards an overall goal, but that it is moving towards death. Moreover during such reflection, we may also be struck by the apparent arbitrariness of the present, which can accentuate the threat.⁶ For when immersed in the framework, our understanding of our projects stretches forwards and backwards, providing us with a firm sense of being in a present rooted in the middle. However when our projects lose their hold, it can start to seem arbitrary that it is *this* present rather than another; I wonder why it is ‘now’ when I am reading these words, rather than some earlier or later ‘now’. There is an apparently obvious answer, namely that certain events have taken place that had not occurred when ‘now’ was my twenty-first birthday, for instance. But the fact that they have taken place is only a fact *now*, so the question resurfaces: why is it *this* ‘now’, when those events have taken place, rather than a previous one when they had not? For when I conceive my life as an objective sequence of events, every event in the sequence has the privilege of ‘now’, making it hard to see how one could be distinguished from another in this respect. This thought can exacerbate the threat of time, making it seem that I might suddenly find myself at a stage of life I do not want

to be at; right at the end perhaps, and with equally little idea why it is this 'now' rather than another.

Thus disinterested reflection on time is liable to be a disturbing prospect for people actively engaged with the framework, since it brings on thoughts of nihilism, decay and death. This is a problem for living; so remedies were devised by philosophical schools such as Epicureanism and Stoicism, as well as by religions. However the ultimate solution was offered by metaphysicians who entertained the possibility that time is not real. The motivation to *want* to think this is clear; but these philosophers found reasons to believe it is actually true, thereby converting a problem for living into a specifically philosophical problem. This happened early on across the great traditions; thus Laozi claimed that the reality of Dao was unchanging, Buddhism traced the origin of suffering to the temporal impermanence of the phenomenal world (the reality of which its various schools debated), and Parmenides, although his view is open to numerous interpretations, clearly thought that reality is not characterized by time understood as a continuum of change.⁷ Within the Western tradition, the theme that soon emerged was that there is reason to believe that the world that exists in time – where nihilism and death seem inevitable – is transcended, and consequently that time characterizes only illusory appearance, not true reality.

An original manifestation of this reasoning is the problem of change in Greek thought, wherein it was discovered that time threatens not just people but also knowledge. For if I take myself to know something on the basis of perception, I may find my descriptions almost immediately falsified as time moves on; I describe a leaf's position only for the wind to blow it out of place, for instance. Thus trying to know something in time seems inherently problematic and liable to embroil us in contradictions, such as believing the leaf both is and is not in a certain place; in contrast with knowledge of the truths of geometry and mathematics, to which time seems irrelevant. Heraclitus was prepared to embrace a contradictory temporal flux as reality; but most philosophers followed Parmenides in thinking that since reality could not be contradictory, time could not be real.⁸ Hence to know reality we would have to look *beyond* time. The idea that time is contradictory and consequently unreal – or at least that ordinary conceptions of time are contradictory – has been definitive of the philosophy of time ever since.

2. Time and objective thought

Time is integral to objective thought, since for objects to move and interact presupposes that they do so in time. Since objective thought provides our best conception of what exists, it is the natural place to look in seeking to answer the question of what time is, as opposed to how it appears to those preoccupied with framework projects. And more pressingly, it is the natural place to look to answer the question of *whether* time exists, which is the question the philosophical traditions prime us for. Objective thought can ordinarily answer existential questions without implication for itself; it can tell us that physical objects are real but hallucinations are not, for instance. However if we were to discover that objective time is unreal, this would imply that the objective world is not real either. This is the conclusion idealist philosophers since Parmenides have reached;

and it provides a satisfying answer to the question of whether the objective world in which nihilism seems unavoidable is transcended.

Now when we try to isolate time as an element within objective thought, it has traditionally been thought of as a property of presentness which passes successively and unidirectionally from one physical arrangement of the universe to another. Thus we may suppose the universe to have the property of being present when it is in a certain physical configuration, and then to pass this property on to another, causally consequent physical configuration. With this conception before us, it is not hard to see why idealists such as Bradley might think that time is, 'so far from enduring the test of criticism, that at a touch it falls apart and declares itself illusory',⁹

Of the many problems that have been noticed with this notion of time, let us single out three striking and influential ones. The first stems from Aristotle, and suggests that if we regard time as a series of presents, then our conception of reality becomes impossibly *thin*.¹⁰ For since presentness is one of our main determinants of reality, there seems a clear sense in which past and future do not exist. Thus we think, for instance, that of the Seven Wonders of the World, only the pyramids still exist (as anything more than rubble); the other six Wonders did exist – and hence are real in the sense of not being fictional – but this attribution of reality requires a time when they were present. However the view that the present is all that exists seems untenable if the present is a durationless boundary point between past and future, as apparently it must be. For if the present had duration, however small, it would encompass a past and future; from the perspective of the beginning of the period, its end would be the future, hence not the present; and from the perspective of the end, its beginning would be the past. Since the present could not encompass a past and future, then, it must be durationless. But it is hard to see how all reality could exist in the durationless coterminous of the nothingness of past and future; or how the continuous flow of time could be composed of a series of such durationless presents.

The second kind of problem stems from thinking of the present as something absolute. For although our conceptions of past and future are relative – in that something can only be past or future relative to some present – our conception of the present is not. This can be seen from the fact that a past or future presupposes a present, but – if we put the first kind of problem to one side – a present does not presuppose a past or future; there is nothing incoherent in the idea of a cosmologically unitary event, for instance. The reason for the difference is that we have something concrete in mind when we think of the present – a Heraclitean flux you could point to – whereas in the case of past and future we are simply relating events which do not have this property to others that do. Thus we cannot understand the present exclusively relationally – as what happened immediately after the past, for instance – since the notion of past makes essential reference to that of the present. But we can understand the past and future this way. The difference is that only the present stands on its own.

The absoluteness of our notion of present seems to prevent objective thought telling us anything informative about it, since objective thought works relationally; it describes objects by relating them to other objects in terms of their shared properties. It also seems to render our notion of time incoherent, since we do not conceive just one event as absolutely present, but rather *every* event – one state of the universe is present,

then the next and so on. Thus McTaggart's famous argument for the unreality of time, which points out that since the present changes, events must possess the contradictory properties of being past, present and future.¹¹ To respond that events do not have these properties at the *same time* is just to appeal to the very notion of time in question – we try to remove the contradiction by appealing to different pasts, presents and futures for which the same issue arises. Thus we might say that an event is only present in the present, future in the past and past in the future – which is not contradictory. But then since the present is always moving, that same event must also be present in the future and past, for instance, which reintroduces the contradiction. The contradiction does not exist from the standpoint of any particular 'now', of course; but the whole point of the dynamic conception of time is that this standpoint continually changes, such that if an event is 'now' it must also be 'not-now'. As Huw Price neatly puts it, the problem is an irreconcilable tension between inclusivity and exclusivity; between making all events bearers of presentness to account for change, and singling out one event as present to avoid contradiction.¹²

The third kind of problem concerns the idea of the present moving.¹³ For anything moving must move at a particular rate, and yet we specify the rate at which things move by reference to time – we say the car is moving at sixty miles per hour, for instance. It seems we cannot similarly specify the rate at which time is moving, then, since we cannot presuppose time as a fixed continuum of change when our aim is to measure time itself. All we can say, vacuously, is that time is moving at a rate of one hour per hour, for instance, which is like saying that the minute hand moves around the clock in the time it takes it to move around the clock. Only when we treat the hand movement as a fixed continuum can we specify the rate at which something is moving by reference to it, such as that the car is moving sixty miles in the time it takes the hand to go around. So it seems that to measure the rate at which time moves, we would need another continuum, a 'hyper-time' as Smart called it; then we could say, for instance, that the present moves at a rate of one hour per unit of hyper-time.¹⁴ But this postulation is obviously ad hoc, and raises the same issue for the rate at which hyper-time moves. Thus it seems the question of how fast time moves cannot coherently be answered – and hence time cannot be moving. The root of the problem, once more, is conceiving time absolutely. We conceive the movement of time absolutely, just as we conceive of the present absolutely, and this is ultimately incoherent.¹⁵

Of course many responses have been made to these problems. However perhaps it is a mistake to attempt to salvage the notion of a moving present, on the grounds that we should not be thinking about time objectively in the first place. This is the line Heidegger takes. In his view, trying to conceive time as objective is just another facet of our tendency to misinterpret everything that exists as 'extant', that is, as an independently existing object; the whole of objective thought constitutes a mistake in this sense, to the extent that we think of it as ontological, rather than just a mode of thinking grounded in the kind of existence we have. Thus he says that, 'Aristotle's aporia with reference to the being of time – which is still the principal difficulty today – derives from the concept of being as equal to being extant.' If Heidegger is right that the kind of aporia we have been considering results from a misconception, then there is no need to try to resolve it.¹⁶

In Heidegger's view, the 'original time' this misconception derives from is human temporality, a feature of the kind of existence ('Dasein') which human beings have. As such, there is 'no nature-time, since all time belongs essentially to the Dasein'; Dasein is 'the *temporal entity as such*'. Temporality is a process – our existence temporalizes itself 'ahead' towards its expectations, 'behind' to its retention of what it has already been, and 'alongside' to the other beings it encounters. As such, it is always 'outside itself'; 'carried away' to future possibilities, past constraints on these possibilities, and the world that provides our present options. These three elements of 'carrying away' – the 'ecstases' of temporality – are unified, such that 'Temporality *temporalizes itself* in the ever current unity of future, past, and present'; thus reference to past resolutions and future aims structure our present, for instance. Moreover, in contrast to the objective conception of time as a potentially infinite sequence of durationless and intrinsically insignificant presents, Heidegger holds that time is essentially finite – because the temporalizing process of projecting ourselves onto our possibilities is limited by death. It is 'spanned within itself' in a unified structure of future, present and past, and always significant as either appropriate or inappropriate to our aims.¹⁷

What Heidegger is trying to do here is find an alternative to an objective conception of time in our framework understanding; time is no longer an objective backdrop invested with significance by our concerns, but rather a matter of how we engage with those concerns – as we project possibilities through goal-directed actions, and in light of the situation we find ourselves in. This account has an essential role in Heidegger's overall project of drawing our conception of ontology away from objective thought and towards a conception of human existence as meaningful. Thus he claims that 'the meaning of Dasein is temporality' – our lives are made meaningful by the possibilities we project. Temporality can be authentic when we project ourselves onto possibilities we have individualized by recognizing our ultimate possibility, namely death; or inauthentic when we project ourselves unthinkingly onto possibilities determined by the public expectations of an anonymous 'they', which 'never dies because it cannot die'.¹⁸ The objective conception of time is rooted in this inauthentic temporalizing, as we turn away from our responsibility for projecting our own finite possibilities, focus instead on a present isolated from past and future, and subsequently misconceive time as a series of extant 'nows'.

Heidegger's conception of time is ultimately a product of his humanistic response to nihilism, then. The truth of nihilism is most visible within objective thought; so Heidegger looked for an alternative source of ontology in our engagement with the framework. This allowed him to give substance to the humanistic view that we make our own lives meaningful, by arguing that projecting our activities towards our projects is itself something ontological; namely human temporality. Given that temporality is part of what we are, then, and also the humanistic premise that the 'meaning of Dasein's Being is not something free-floating which is other than and "outside of" itself, but is the self-understanding Dasein itself', he was able to portray our lives as meaningful by nature.¹⁹ Moreover the possibility of different ways of temporalizing – whether authentic or inauthentic – left room for his redemptive agenda; the connection between projecting towards our possibilities, and death as our ultimate possibility, stripped

death of its connotations of nihilism, while reconfiguring the religious associations between death and the meaning of an afterlife in humanism's favour.

For nihilists who think that the meaning of life would indeed have to be 'outside of' human existence, this project will not be attractive. But whatever our judgement on the humanism it is designed to support, Heidegger's ontology of everydayness is untenable; and its account of time is the clearest demonstration of this. To see this, we need only revisit the objection we made in Chapter 1; namely that even if Heidegger is right that objective thought grew out of our everyday understanding of the world, it does not follow that the understanding it provides is less fundamental. This is because objective thought's abstraction from human concerns provides a more comprehensive and explanatorily powerful way of understanding the world, and there is no reason temporal priority should take precedence over explanatory power.

However given Heidegger's conception of time, this objection is in danger of begging the question; since his prioritizing of everydayness as how we are 'proximally and for the most part', must *itself* be understood in terms of his account of time – everydayness is temporality, he says.²⁰ Thus Heidegger's claim for the priority of everydayness cannot be that we understand the world this way for most of our objective time, or that it is 'primordial' in the sense that it came first. Rather it is the claim that objective time 'arises from' our ability to authentically temporalize our projects; which is a claim for explanatory priority.²¹ But in that case, Heidegger's case is matched and bettered by objective thought. For although he has an account of how the notion of objective time arises from temporalizing our projects, objective thought can equally well explain why human beings preoccupied by their projects might anthropocentrically conceive the passing of objective time in terms of those projects.²² And there is much else besides that objective thought can explain, but which is rendered problematic by Heidegger's alternative – since the existence of objective time makes sense of there having been vast swathes of time which passed before human beings existed, and which will no doubt pass afterwards.

Now Heidegger does not deny that objective thought can legitimately describe existence independent of human beings; he claims only that our conception of it is the result of 'thematizing' components of our being as objective.²³ Thus he says that:

When Dasein does not exist, 'independence' 'is' not either, nor 'is' the 'in-itself'. In such a case this sort of thing can be neither understood nor not understood. In such a case even entities within-the-world can neither be discovered nor lie hidden. *In such a case* it cannot be said that entities are, nor can it be said that they are not. But *now*, as long as there is an understanding of Being and therefore an understanding of presence-at-hand, it can indeed be said that *in this case* entities will still continue to be.²⁴

The use of quotation marks is designed to remind us that our notion of independent existence is part of a human understanding of the world. Thus although it is part of our understanding that there was a time before human beings, and which will continue even if we become extinct, these claims only make sense because there is human existence. So Heidegger claims to be able to make sense of independent existence as

part of our understanding of the world, while denying, plausibly enough, that there is any other perspective to accommodate.

However this influential response to charges of idealism and anthropomorphism is completely undermined by Heidegger's account of time. For if temporalizing is a human process, then it is part of our understanding of the world – as Heidegger would have it develop at least – that without human beings there is no time. Entities exist in time, however. Thus it cannot be a legitimate consequence of a certain understanding of entities to say that they 'will still continue to be' after the demise of humans, once we understand that 'continuing to be' is a result of human temporalizing. For if we temporalize forwards or backwards to a time when there are no humans, we impose time on a situation in which we recognize that there would be no time, since we – the temporalizers – would not exist. Since our understanding of entities is dependent upon their existing within time, then, we cannot, on reflection, coherently think of them as existing independently; for it is incoherent to conceive them existing in a time before humans evolved, while recognizing that there was no time before humans evolved.

It is not just that Heidegger's account of time as a human process has the implausible consequence that there was no time before human beings, then, for it has the even more implausible consequence that there were no entities either. The problem ultimately derives from the fact that our everyday engagement with our projects simply does not lend itself to ontological interpretation. For within an objective world, it makes sense that we might be preoccupied by our projects, and the functions of objects that aid in those projects. Without an objective world, however, the whole notion of functionality become mysterious, since it can no longer be thought of as objects having a size and shape suited to performing our tasks. And the notion of projecting goals onto the future becomes even more mysterious, since once ontologized as time itself, this projection becomes a unique, *sui generis* process which brings with it the existence of all entities in time, including, incoherently, entities that predate and postdate human temporalizing. Heidegger's account generates its own aporia, then, and once we have recognized that it arises through a misguided project of trying to undermine nihilism, we have more than enough reason to persist with an objective conception of time.

3. The block theory

If we want to know what time is, then it seems we must look to objective thought; and yet the traditional conception of time as an objective moving present is manifestly problematic – which suggests that time cannot be real and hence that the objective world cannot be real either. We might respond by trying to defend the traditional conception, as many philosophers continue to do; but the definitive twentieth-century response is to abandon it and replace it with a new objective conception of time. The scientific impetus for this response came from Einstein's theory of relativity, which provided new reasons to think that the notion of a moving present was untenable, while presenting a new conception of time's integrality to the nature of the objective world. The conclusion many philosophers drew was that there was no reason to labour with the traditional problems; the idealists were right that they were insoluble and

indicated something important. However they did not indicate the unreality of time; just that the traditional conception was incoherent. For time as correctly conceived, on this account, makes no objective distinction between past, present and future – there is no moving present within which reality exclusively resides, since everything that exists does so eternally and in fixed temporal relations.

The main way in which relativity bolsters the case against the moving present is through its commitment to the relativity of simultaneity. For the moving present conception, on the face of it, presupposes absolute simultaneity across the universe at any particular present; there is only one present, in which all reality has a particular physical configuration simultaneously. The present state of affairs on Earth could not be simultaneous with a past state of affairs on Mars, for instance, given that on this conception the past state of affairs has ceased to exist.²⁵ However relativity theory holds that simultaneity, and time generally – when considered in isolation – is always observer-relative. To take a typical illustration, consider a spacecraft orbiting the Earth with a source at its midpoint emitting pulses of light to equidistant targets at the front and back.²⁶ For an observer on the spacecraft, the light arrives simultaneously at the front and back targets. But to an observer on Earth, the light arrives at the back before the front; because the front target is moving away from the light as the spacecraft travels away from the observer, while the rear target is moving towards it. Moreover to an observer on a spacecraft travelling faster than the first one and overtaking it, the light arrives at the front before the back; because the back target is moving away from the light as the spacecraft falls behind the observer. This seems to render untenable the notion of a single present at which the light either simultaneously reaches both targets or else does not.

According to the ‘block theory’ of the universe inspired by relativity theory, these differing observations are to be resolved by reconceiving time as a dimension of the unified four-dimensional reality of space-time. Thus the idea is that each observer is reporting only an instantaneous state of four-dimensional reality; a projection or three-dimensional ‘time-slice’ of it, rather as we might think of a photograph as showing only a two-dimensional projection of a three-dimensional object. With an understanding of this four-dimensional reality, then – of the kind physics provides by calculating the distance in space-time between the two events of the light hitting the front and back targets – the apparently conflicting observations are related to each other and resolved as simply different perspectives on the same reality. This reality cannot be thought of as one in which objects exist in time, but rather one in which time is part of what an object is: objects extend through time as well as space.

If we accept that objective reality is a continuum of space-time and reject the notion of an objective present, then it has seemed to most philosophers that we can no longer think of the present as the sole repository of reality. Rather there are just different time-slices of reality which we can temporally order in terms of their being earlier or later than each other, but all of which have an equal claim to exist; all the temporal parts of the universe exist together as a ‘block’. Classification of objects and events as past, present or future is thus revealed to be anthropocentric and without objective significance, since it depends on our own, physically arbitrary frame of reference; rather as spatial classifications of objects as ‘here’ or ‘there’ do. Moreover objects can

no longer be thought of as coming into existence, then ceasing to exist, only as having starting and ending points in space-time. And neither can objects be thought to change as time passes; if the notion of change is to be salvaged, it must be reconceived as one time-slice of a four-dimensional object being eternally different from another.

This radical reconception of time sweeps away all the problems we encountered for the moving present view. Reality is no longer confined to a durationless present, since all of space-time exists and there is no objectively privileged present. Neither is there a contradiction between past, present and future, because events do not temporally change; we may speak of an event as past, present and future, but in doing so we simply relate it to other events which are before, after or simultaneous with it; and these relations do not change. Thus the standard, if controversial, philosophical proposal to make sense of the notions of past, present and future within a four-dimensional reality, is that when we think or say that some event is in the past, present or future, what makes our thought or utterance true – if it is true – is that within a certain frame of reference, the event in question is before, simultaneous with, or after the thought or utterance itself.²⁷ And finally, we are no longer faced with the problem of our inability to specify the rate at which time flows, because on this conception it does not flow; it simply exists as one of the axes of a fixed continuum.

In general, the four-dimensional conception of time seems to succeed in demystifying time by replacing an absolute conception with a relative one. Rather than time being something unique which we must treat as a basic although manifestly problematic feature of reality, once reconceived in relation to space, the problems are removed and we can say something informative about it in both science and philosophy. Moreover by removing the problems, philosophy blocks the idealist move to a denial of the reality of the objective world, while nevertheless managing to retain much of its motivational appeal; given that like idealism, four-dimensionalism also denies the reality of a moving present. This shared appeal is not so obvious in case of idealism's ability to distance us from nihilism, since conceived as a four-dimensional continuum, the objective world seems just as meaningless as ever; perhaps more so since it shows that we are not moving towards any goals at all. Yet by demonstrating science's ability to overthrow our conception of something as basic to our understanding as time, four-dimensionalism holds out the prospect that there are more mysteries waiting to be uncovered which might radically transform a nihilistic outlook. And in the case of the threat of time, the appeal of the block universe is just as strong as with idealism. Since if time is not flowing, it is not flowing towards death; and our position within that flow cannot be arbitrary.²⁸ Thus a concern which has always haunted reflection on time, and the philosophical quest it motivated for something permanent beyond the inconstant temporal flux, both receive their answer: the concern has its basis in an illusion, and there is no temporal flux since time itself is permanent.²⁹

Now it has been argued that the science does not settle the case against a moving present, and that we should not consider the science settled anyway – maybe quantum physics will require radical changes to our conception of space-time which will reinstate the notion of a moving present, for instance.³⁰ This seems right, to the extent that any scientific development is open to a variety of philosophical interpretations, and may itself be overthrown in the course of scientific progress; science may influence

a traditional philosophical problem, but never definitely settle it. But even though it is possible to defend the moving present against the block universe, what is the motivation to do so, given the advantages of the latter and the problems of the former?

The motivation is that many philosophers, as well as scientists, find the block universe deeply dissatisfactory, and this is for the simple reason that it seems to us – whenever we reflect upon it – that the present has some objective privilege and that time is always moving on.³¹ If this is wrong, and each stage of our lives exists eternally, it seems our framework conception of life must be an illusion; we are not progressing through life towards our goals, since all stages of life exist on a par. And yet here I am, at a certain stage of my life, working towards certain goals; that is how experience presents my situation. Moreover it is not even clear that this kind of experience *could* be an illusion; since if time is not passing, our experience should, on the face of it, come to a standstill. We might think of this as like freeze-framing a film, if it were not for the fact that experiencing even a stationary image presupposes a time in which our attention can shift and our thoughts change. So if time is not moving, experience does not even seem possible.

However defenders of the block universe have responded by providing accounts of why experience inclines us to judge that there is an objective present and that the present is moving, even though these judgements are false. For example, it has been argued that the apparent objectivity of the present is rooted in a pragmatic need for intersubjective agreement.³² Thus although there are time-lags involved in observation and oral communication because of the time taken for signals to pass to our sense organs and for subsequent neural processing, these can safely be ignored for most practical purposes; doing so produces intersubjective agreement about what is happening ‘now’ and generates the false impression of an objective present. In a similar vein, evidence from psychology and neuroscience has been invoked to argue that the apparent objectivity of the present results from our brains integrating temporally disparate inputs into a unified experience.³³ Thus we hear two sounds as simultaneous if the time between them is short enough, for instance; and it has been found that the ‘simultaneity window’ for such judgements varies between different sensory modalities, different people, different age groups, and can even be manipulated in various ways; this again suggests that our sense of an objective present is a creation of consciousness. And finally, the notion of the ‘specious’ present – commonly understood as the brief interval of time during which different contents of consciousness are experienced together as co-present within a single experience – has been invoked to explain why the present seems to move. Thus the idea is that conscious experience of a specious present contains a temporal depth in which change is perceptible, and that the combination of such presents accounts for our sense of the present as moving without any need to invoke an actual moving present.³⁴

What these suggestions have in common is the idea that our conception of time as a moving present is a reflection of the nature of consciousness; we are mistakenly projecting elements of our experience onto the world itself. Thus to partake in the idealist’s view that the moving present is illusory, without following them in rendering the objective world illusory, the block universe conception still needs to explain the basis of this illusion; and it does so, just like idealism, by looking to consciousness.

However for this tactic to be successful, consciousness would have to be part of the objective world. And we have already seen that it is not. For any attempt to place consciousness within the objective world ultimately results in revisionism, in which we deny that what we ordinarily think of as experience exists, in order to re-label as 'experiences' certain objective states, such as brain states.

The revisionists' ability to explain the illusion of a moving present, then, is only as good as their ability to explain what they take to be the illusion of experience; which we have already seen is no good at all. For the revisionist must say that when we are in certain objective states, we are inclined to judge (falsely) that we are undergoing subjective experiences; and it is the nature we ascribe to these experiences which explains the illusion of an objective moving present – the illusion of experience generates the illusion of moving time. However, since revisionism cannot rationally explain our inclination to judge that there are experiences – since there is nothing in the objective world we might reasonably mistake for such things – neither can it explain our inclination to judge that experience occupies a privileged and dynamic present. Consider, for example, my judgement that I am aware of a certain movement within the unified experience of a specious present; or that I hear two sounds as simultaneous though I know they are not. If there were such experiences – or something I might misrepresent as such – then my judgements would have a rational basis. But since there cannot be within objective thought, my inclination to make such judgements is rendered rationally inexplicable. And in that case belief in an objective moving present is also rationally inexplicable; which means that the block theorist's appeal to consciousness has failed to explain why time seems as it does to us.

Unless a moving present is held to be a feature of independent reality, then – with all the problems this entails – the datum of an apparent moving present must be traced to consciousness; which is a proposal that cannot be pursued within objective thought. But how does such a proposal fare in light of the transcendent hypothesis?

4. Time and transcendence

The hypothesis begins from the need to accommodate the fact that the world is experienced from perspectives, despite objective thought being centreless. Now these perspectives on the world are not only spatial, but also temporal; we experience the world from a certain place and time. There is a sense in which these places and times vary, in that the world is experienced from various objective locations and dates; but another in which they do not, since it is always experienced from 'here' and 'now'. The invariable sense fixes the reference for the variable, since for each different experience, 'here' and 'now' will refer to different spatial and temporal locations in the objective world, thereby seemingly rooting experience in that world. So although experience does not belong to the objective world, we always interpret it as something spatially and temporally located; this provides us with a perspective on a world we conceive as lacking perspective.³⁵

There is an important difference between the invariable spatial and temporal orientations of experience. The difference is that the spatial, unlike the temporal, is

entirely conditional, in that it tells you only where you would be in space if you were having a veridical experience. So for instance, I interpret my current visual experience as a self-aware image of the kind that were it veridical, it would have to be located in a certain position in objective space in order to have been appropriately caused. Thus just as we can work out where a photograph must have been taken from, given what is visible in the photograph, so our interpretation of experiences as spatial implies a certain location. Given what I can see of the trees and my desk, for instance, my experience would have to occupy a certain location in order to have been appropriately caused. But now suppose that while still seated at my desk, I hallucinate being at the top of the tree; I find myself apparently looking down over the roofs of houses, say. Again my experience provides a sense of 'here': it tells me where I would have to be if my experience existed in real, objective space, and was appropriately caused by objects within that space. But this time the experience is illusory. And if we suppose further that I am aware of this fact, then the experience does not spatially orientate me at all – it does not tell me where 'here' is, only where it would have to be if I trusted the experience (which I do not).

The case with dreams is similar; a dream experience tells me where I would be if the space of the dream were real. It orientates me within the dream, but the orientation is conditional such that my sense of the dream experience as 'here' tells me only where I would be if the dream world were real. If I recognize that the dream is transcended, however, then I also recognize that its sense of 'here' is illusory, and so provides no idea of where my experience is being had from. Moreover if I consider waking experience on the transcendent hypothesis, I similarly cannot think of the spatial orientation of the experience as applicable to transcendent reality; not just because the space in which its orientation applies is transcended, as in the dream case, but also because I have no reason to think that spatial notions have any application to transcendent reality. The reason the spatial orientation of 'here' dissolves on any transcendent hypothesis – whether from the perspective of a dream or the objective world – is that it is part of an interpretation of experience as a constituent of the objective world; it tells us where experience would be located if it were part of the objective world. If the experiential presentation is not of the objective world, then – as in a dream, or else if we think of experience as not part of the objective world, as on the transcendent hypothesis – then the interpretation is no longer applicable. It can now only tell us where the experience *seems* to be, though we know it is not there.

The case of the temporal orientation of 'now' is different, because although this too is part of an interpretation of experience as objective, it also has an absolute, non-conditional sense. Thus consider a case where I hallucinate a scene from the eighteenth century; just as the hallucination tells me where 'here' would have to be in order for me to see that scene, it also tells me when 'now' would be. That is, it tells me that my experience would have to be simultaneous with, or close to simultaneous with, the various elements of the scene being in the positions they are experienced as being in; just as a photograph must have been taken at a time more or less coincident with the scene it depicts. This is because we are interpreting the experience as something caused by the scene. However since this is a hallucination, the experience cannot be taking place then; the scene is long past. Now in the spatial case, the fact that the

experience is not veridical completely removes my orientation. Does this also happen in the temporal case? No, because although the experience can no longer tell me when it would be taking place in objective time, the fact remains that the experience is 'now'. That I am not experiencing something in the objective world, then, dissolves the conditional sense of 'now', just as it dissolves the conditional sense of 'here'. But the experience remains 'now' in another sense.³⁶

As an illustration, consider once more the dreaming case. Dream experience provides a conditional sense of 'now', since it tells us what would have to be taking place at roughly the same time as the experience if it presented the objective world. However if we realize that it is a dream, and hence that our experience must be something outside the dream, this does not remove the temporal orientation of the experience; as it does remove its spatial orientation. For we still think the experience is 'now' – outside of the dream the dreamer is having this experience 'now', even though the experience provides no way of knowing how this 'now' relates to the temporal sequence of the objective world. This is not just the point that we think that outside the dream, the experience must be taking place at some 'now', just as we might also think it must be taking place at some 'here'; this draws on our knowledge of the world outside the dream and applies only the conditional senses. Rather, the point is that the experience is taking place in the same 'now' inside and outside the dream – which has no parallel with the spatial case.

Similarly, if we consider waking experience on the transcendent hypothesis, the thought that the experience transcends the objective world does nothing to shake our conviction that it must nevertheless be 'now'. Of course in considering the hypothesis that reality transcends the objective world, we have no reason to think that our conceptual apparatus – which is bound to the objective world – has application beyond that world. However just as we have no choice but to think of the transcendent being we are interpreting as 'experience', we equally have no choice but to think of it as 'now'. We cannot think of it as atemporal, or even as possibly atemporal, when we are fixing our attention on its concrete presence. This is because just like the notions of 'experience', 'appearance' and 'self-awareness', the notion of temporal presence is an attempt to characterize transcendent existence as it is in itself.

There is, then, a transcendent sense of 'now'. This sense must ultimately derive from objective thought – as indeed do all our concepts of what exists – but like 'experience', it is an attempt to characterize something that we realize, on reflection, can have no place within the objective world. This sense of 'now' is inextricable from our notion of experience, since we cannot think of experience except as 'now'; we can of course think of past experiences, but in order to think of them as *experiences*, we must think of them as having been 'now'. This thought might seem illusory, since in order to think of any past event, such as an ancient volcanic eruption, for instance, we must think of it as having been 'now'; this, it might seem, is just what our notion of 'past' amounts to. But this is only true on the objective moving present conception of time. If we think in terms of the block universe conception instead, there is no reason to think of the eruption as 'now' in any sense; we can just think of it as an earlier slice of space-time, and need not also think of it as once 'now' by superimposing a past utterance or thought with which it was simultaneous.³⁷ But with experience the situation is different, since

no matter how we conceive the pastness of a past experience, we must still think of it as having been 'now'; this is just part of our conception of experience.

It might still seem that there is something illusory here. For perhaps what seems to be a significant claim about experience is really just a tautology, as D. H. Mellor thinks; rather as it has similarly been claimed – by Adolf Grünbaum – that the idea that only the present is real is rooted in a tautology.³⁸ Thus perhaps the reason we are inclined to think that only the present exists, is that the notion of existence we have in mind is *present existence*, and hence we are tautologously claiming that only what presently exists, presently exists. And similarly, perhaps the reason experience and temporal presence seem inseparable is that the notion of experience we have in mind is *present experience*; we are being misled by the tautologous judgement that the experiences now being had are present, into thinking that because such a judgement would be true whenever we made it, the notions of experience and temporal presence are inseparable. But according to this argument, experience has no special connection with presentness; if we think about a past experience, we need not think of it as 'now' in anything more than the trivial sense – which applies to all events – that it would have been 'now' in relation to a judgement made simultaneously with it.

But how exactly do we mistake the tautology that present experience is present for the significant claim that experience can only exist by being present? The idea seems to be that we fail to notice that we are only thinking about experiences simultaneous with our judgement, rather than experience in general. Thus the objection works by splitting consciousness into two components – the part making the judgement, and the experience being judged – and supposing that the judging part is liable to be misled by a tautology because it overlooks the fact that it has restricted its attention to present experience. The problem, however, is that the judging and the experience seem equally to be 'now': they seem like part of a unified conscious experience. To apply the same account to explain why the judgement seems to be 'now', then, we would have to say that we fail to notice we are only thinking about judgements simultaneous with our judgement. But now we have split consciousness again, by introducing a judgement about the judgement; and this new judgement will also seem to be 'now'. And no matter how many artificial divisions we introduce into consciousness, the fact will remain that when we think about conscious experience, we think about it as 'now' in the transcendent sense; our supposed susceptibility to a tautological judgement cannot explain this away, since the possibility of such a judgement itself presupposes the conscious 'now'.³⁹

Once it is recognized that we have a transcendent sense of 'now' in addition to our conditional senses of both time and space, considerable light is shed on traditional metaphysical debates about the nature of time. Take, to begin with, the view that mind is temporal but not spatial. There is something to this, since experience is indeed more closely related to time than space; but the difference has been misunderstood because the transcendent sense has been overlooked. The reasoning behind the traditional view is simple and compelling. It is that nothing in the space of the objective world fits our notion of experience: there are no mental images located behind our eyes, only neurons. However, experiences do seem to take place simultaneously with, before, or after, events in the objective world – my current visual experience is simultaneous with

the leaves on the trees being in certain positions, for instance. And this seems to be true even if I am hallucinating or dreaming; even in such a case, my experiences would be taking place simultaneously with certain events in the world. So it seems that the mind exists in time but not space.

This reasoning is mistaken, however, because our conditional senses constitute a unified misinterpretation of experience as objective – they tell you where and when experience would have to be if it were part of the objective world. So if experience cannot be found in objective space, we have just as much reason to think that it cannot be found in objective time either. On the face of it, the case seems different because experiences always seem to be simultaneous with objective events. But then again, they equally always seem to have a spatial location – they seem to be located where I am, and must be conceived spatially if their apparent orientation is to be made sense of as the effect of certain objective influences. Moreover, if experiences were non-spatial but nevertheless simultaneous with objective events, then this simultaneity would be inexplicable except by recourse to a problematic metaphysical theory. For non-spatial experiences could not be physically caused; we would have to appeal to a special notion of interaction, or perhaps a mysterious parallelism between mind and world. But the fact that experiences seem to enter into temporal relations with objects and events in the objective world gives us no more reason to entertain these hypotheses, than the parallel fact that experiences seem to be spatial gives us reason to think that there must be some rarefied metaphysical sense in which they really are.

If there is good reason to think that experiences are not spatial, then, and that we misinterpret them as spatial to provide ourselves with a perspective on a perspectiveless world, then we have just as good reason to think that they are not really temporally in the objective world either; that they are not really simultaneous with, before or after objective events. And yet it is harder to believe our conditional sense of time is illusory. Suppose I am dreaming, and both of the conditional senses are deceiving me: if the space and time of the dream were real, I would be on the turret of a castle in medieval times, but I am actually asleep in bed. Now we readily accept that the space of the dream is illusory; but it still seems that the experience must be taking place in the time of the objective world – in sync with the movements of the clock on the wall above my bed, for instance. But this thought is confused. For while it is true that to make sense of the experience, we must interpret it as taking place simultaneously with objective events, it is equally true that we must interpret it as taking place in the space of the objective world – as inside my dreaming head; for otherwise we could make no sense of our ability to interfere with those experiences by causally affecting a certain region of objective space. So once again, if we think experiences are not in objective space, we have the same reason to think they are not in objective time either; outside of the context in which their conditional senses apply they are equally untrustworthy.

If we have the same reason to mistrust our conditional senses of space and time, then, why are we so inclined to think that experience does indeed exist in objective time? The reason is that we have a transcendent sense of 'now'. Recognizing this undeniable temporality of experience, we are inclined to apply our only substantive understanding of time, and so falsely conclude that experience exists in objective time. Thus we make sense of the transcendent 'now' as a feature of the objective world, such

that experience is 'now' at a certain point in the objective time-order. But experience does not belong to the objective world and so nothing in the objective world is 'now' in this sense; being 'now' is not a privilege experience has at a certain time in the objective order, because experience does not belong to that order. And this explains why it is so hard to accept that the mind is not in objective time, even when we have recognized that it is not in space; we cannot help thinking of it temporally, and we mistake this for the temporality of the objective world. The tradition has been wrong to conclude that the mind shares the temporality but not the spatiality of the objective world, then. But nevertheless, there remains a sense in which experience is temporal but not spatial; because spatiality, unlike temporality, is *exclusively* a part of our misinterpretation of experience as objective.

It is the superimposition of the transcendent 'now' upon the objective world which is responsible not just for this mistake, but for all the traditional perplexities we have encountered when trying to understand time. Thus if we think of a particular stage of the objective world as 'now' in this sense, then we think of it as 'now' absolutely. But when we reason about this property of being absolutely present as a putative feature of the objective world, it will seem to be durationless; contradictions will arise from conceiving it as a unique property which passes from one stage to the next; and the very notion of it passing will appear problematic. These problems result from trying to impose perspective upon a world we conceive as lacking perspective.

Thus to make sense of experience as indirect awareness of an objective world, we think of it as belonging to the objective temporal order – we misrepresent experiences as things which exist simultaneously with, before and after objective events. Now given that we always think of experience as 'now' in the transcendent sense, we think of each of these putatively objective experiences as 'now'. However, our conception of the transcendent 'now' is unitary – only one experience can be 'now' in this sense, and so if we are to conceive the transcendent 'now' as part of the objective temporal order, we must think of it being passed sequentially along the objective series of experiences, such that past experiences were 'now' but are 'now' no more. We thereby arrive at an objective moving present conception of time, albeit one centred on experience. However, we may also arrive at this conception by superimposing the transcendent 'now' directly onto the objective world; since we ordinarily think of what we are directly aware of as the world. Thus we may reason that objective states of the world are 'now' in the transcendent sense, and conceive time as a matter of this 'now' being passed along sequentially, with experiences simply numbering among all the other objective things which momentarily bear the 'now'.

The problem with this conception of time is that it attempts to find the temporal perspective of experience in a world that has none. This is highlighted by the fact that objective thought, in its drive to consistently describe an objective world, has discovered that such a world should be conceived as a block universe; and hence as entirely lacking in temporal perspective. Now defenders of the objective moving present may object that it may still be possible to conceive an objective present within four-dimensional space-time, and that even if it is not, scientific developments may yet vindicate the moving present. However, if we are right that this conception results from illegitimately superimposing the transcendent 'now' onto the objective world, there is

no reason to cling to such possibilities; the fact that the block universe dispenses with temporal perspective emerges as a point in its favour, from a philosophical point of view, since it shows objective thought being carried through to its logical conclusion.

So how do we retain the fact that we have a conscious perspective on the temporal order of the objective world, without illegitimately trying to objectivize that perspective? We must realize that the temporal order – which we currently have good reason to think of as a block universe – is an interpretation of the transcendent ‘now’ of experience. But we must also realize that *we cannot play the same hand twice* – we cannot commit to the existence of the transcendent ‘now’ within that temporal order, since the ‘now’ was used up when we interpreted it as that order. Thus we will never find the transcendent ‘now’ in the objective world, any more than we will find experience. However, we will find objective misrepresentations of experience, and one of them will always seem to be privileged by the transcendent ‘now’. For at any point in objective time, we will be interpreting transcendent experience as an objective experience caused by an objective world; and the putatively objective experience – since it is a misinterpretation of transcendent experience – will seem to be privileged within the objective time-order as the one which bears the transcendent ‘now’. Since this interpretation brings in its wake the objective world, it commits us to past states of the objective world when we were also conscious, and hence to past objective experiences which were once privileged as bearers of the transcendent ‘now’. But these past experiences did not really bear this privilege – any more than the present one does – because none of them exist. They are all misrepresentations. Only the transcendent reality of experience bears the transcendent ‘now’.

So we are always interpreting transcendent reality objectively, and hence always leaving it behind in favour of both the objective world and the putatively objective experiences (which are misrepresentations) needed to understand that world and have a life within it. Since we are always interpreting transcendent reality, we are always trapped within the transcendent ‘now’. Which is just how things seem to us; so long as we are conscious it is always ‘now’. The moving present conception explains this phenomenon by supposing that the ‘now’ follows us along throughout our lives. But the transcendent hypothesis, by contrast, explains it as a consequence of the fact that at any stage in our conscious lives, we find an objective world by making sense of the transcendent ‘now’ of experience. By resisting the temptation to introduce the transcendent ‘now’ into the objective time-order, the hypothesis avoids the problems of the moving present conception, and allows us to agree with the block theorist that there is no privileged present within the objective world. And it is similarly by resisting the temptation to introduce transcendent experience into the objective world, that the hypothesis addresses the mind–body problem. In both cases, yielding to this temptation – by mistaking our objective misrepresentation for the real thing, so to speak – lands us with insoluble problems. We are left trying to find experiences, or a privileged present, within a world that contains nothing of the kind.

Once we recognize that our belief in experiences at the various temporal stages of the world is rooted in misrepresentation, we will not think that the transcendent ‘now’ and other remembered ‘now’s form an objective sequence. To try to make sense of such a sequence, with all the traditional problems attendant upon such a venture, is to try

to make sense of a misrepresentation which is ultimately incoherent; since it combines thinking of experience as objective, with thinking of it as self-aware and 'now'. The problems result from this incoherence. Thus we will find that the 'nows' necessarily lack duration (since they cannot be identified with any durable event in the objective world), that their attribution at different points in objective time creates contradictions (since the transcendent 'now' is unique), and that objective thought lacks the resources to make sense of one 'now' passing to the next (since it is not a property of an object or event). However, keeping the transcendent 'now' out of the objective time-order does not mean giving up on temporal perspective, because it is always the transcendent 'now' which is being interpreted as experience of an objective world.

Thus the transcendent hypothesis makes sense of there being a past, present and future relative to events which we privilege owing to their apparent simultaneity with putatively objective experiences which we misconceive as bearers of the transcendent 'now'. This allows us to understand our experiential perspective on the temporal order of the objective world, without generating the traditional problems which arise when we try to introduce perspective into that order; it avoids an implausible denial of perspective while also avoiding the misguided project of objectifying it. It avoids realism about an objective present; and it avoids idealism too, since we always interpret transcendent experience as experience of an objective world with its own objective temporal order. If human beings cease to exist then transcendent reality will no longer be interpreted this way, of course. But that does not mean that the interpretation would be any the less valid; if the time of the objective world were a product of human temporality, by contrast, then it would no longer be valid without the human way of life it gains its significance from.

For all its advantages, this account is easily misunderstood. For it is liable to stubbornly seem that which experience is 'now' is constantly changing, and hence that we must be attributing change to transcendent being itself, such that the objective world is an interpretation of each experience in turn. Thus we may reason that the objective world was once an interpretation of a past experience, then another, and now it is an interpretation of present experience. But if we are thinking of transcendent experience changing, we have mistakenly projected it into the objective world. For transcendent experience does not gain or lose its 'now': it *is* 'now'. When we misrepresent experience as part of the objective world, we do so as a series of experiences in sync with its temporal stages. However, these 'objective experiences' do not gain and then lose the transcendent 'now'; they do not even exist, but are rather our way of making sense of transcendent experience as experience of an objective world. Thus although we always interpret transcendent experience as a particular objective experience with a temporal privilege in the objective order – the one that is 'now' in the transcendent sense – this putatively objective experience cannot lose its privilege only for another to gain it; because there is no such experience and nothing in the objective world has a temporal privilege. Transcendent experience exists, but what we interpret it as does not.

It might now seem that we have simply transferred the problems of the moving present from the objective world to our misrepresentation of experience; that our misinterpretation must be constantly changing, and hence changing at a particular

rate, for instance. However, to say that our misinterpretation is changing, is just to say that we have different misinterpretations at different times. Thus human beings have different beliefs at different times about which of their experiences are 'now', and which are no longer 'now', and they also occupy different 'experiential states'; the objective counterparts of experiences. But what is being misinterpreted – the transcendent 'now' – cannot be coherently thought of as changing. There are no past, present or future states of transcendence, only a unitary transcendent reality which is misinterpreted as different objective experiences at different times. And at each time, this misinterpretation leads us to privilege one of those experiences as the one which is present.

Suppose this is a dream. I can recognize that experience is 'now', and must exist outside the dream. But if I think about a past experience, I have entered the world of the dream; which is just to interpret the present experience as part of a dream world which once included the past experience. If I resist this thought, however, and suppose that the past of the dream was, at the time, an interpretation of a past transcendent experience, then I have tried to think into the past of the world outside the dream. We could, in principle, do this in the case of dreams – if it were possible to be this lucid while asleep – because we understand the past of the objective world. But we could not in the case of the objective world, because this would require us to illegitimately apply a concept of 'past' derived from the objective world, to a transcendent reality of which we have no reason to think it has application. We have no more reason to think 'present' has application either, of course, but we cannot help thinking of transcendent experience as present; and it is a presence which does not imply a past or future except when we misrepresent it as part of the dream or objective world. Thus at every point in our conscious lives, we are interpreting the same unique transcendent 'now' as the objective world, and at each point we misrepresent it as an objective experience which is privileged as 'now'. But we cannot make sense of this privilege in terms of the objective world, since it does not belong there; and we cannot make sense of it in terms of transcendence, since we cannot make positive sense of transcendence. And that is why we find ourselves trapped in the transcendent 'now', and unable to make sense of why it seems to privilege one stage of the objective world rather than another. But when we also understand that it is a mistake to try to make sense of it, the problem is solved.⁴⁰

There is no objective moving present and transcendent experience does not move; yet the present does *seem* to move. This is explained to some extent by our misinterpretation of the transcendent 'now', since whenever we reflect on experience, our objective misrepresentation brings in its wake past states of the objective world which we misrepresent as its causal antecedents. However this cannot be the whole story, since the appearance of a moving present is a real phenomenon we experience in the present; I look to the sky and see the clouds move, for instance. But now that consciousness has been reintroduced into the picture, we are free to draw on the psychological accounts appealed to by block theorists. Thus we may say, for instance, that when we misinterpret transcendent experience as an objective experience, we misinterpret it as an objective experience of a specious present.⁴¹ So assuming that some such account can be made to work, we can explain this sense of a moving present

without the need for an actual moving present; while appealing to the transcendent 'now' in order to avoid aligning the account with revisionism.

But in describing transcendent reality as 'now' are we not attempting to characterize reality in itself? We are, just as we are in describing it as 'experience'; which is unavoidable given the way of representing the world we have developed. 'Experience' is our rather vague conception of what reality must be like for us to have *any* perspective on it, and 'now' (in the transcendent sense) is our rather vague conception of what reality must be like for us to have a *temporal* perspective on it. We cannot think of experience without thinking of it as 'now' and we cannot think of 'now' without thinking of experience; these are two inseparable aspects of how we try to make sense of transcendence, ultimately derived from the objective world. We attribute these features to transcendence when we realize they cannot belong to that world. Thus we misconceive experience as objective, and we misconceive 'now' as a privilege attaching to an objective experience. But then when we realize that the objective world contains no experience, we form the transcendent hypothesis and attribute these characteristics to transcendent reality. These attempts to positively characterize reality as it is in itself recognizably fail, since we have no reason to think concepts formed from the objective world have application to transcendent reality. On reflection, then, we should say only that to describe transcendent reality as 'experience' and 'now' is to point out that we cannot grasp its nature; which we cannot help thinking of as experiential and temporally present. Thus we recognize that consciousness creates differential contexts of existence, and so hypothesize that it exists in a context that transcends the objective world – to explain why we cannot grasp its existence objectively and yet cannot deny that it exists. And likewise, we hypothesize that the temporal perspective of 'now' transcends the objective world, to explain why we cannot grasp its existence objectively and yet cannot deny that it exists.

5. Respite without consolation

Does the transcendent hypothesis show that time is unreal? It does not, because time is part of the objective world. It does, however, show that the moving present conception is the result of illegitimately superimposing the transcendent 'now' upon the objective order. And so given that on the block conception, movement and change are to be accounted for without imparting any change to time itself – and given also that we cannot coherently think of transcendent being as changing – we can agree that the appearance of a moving present is an illusion created by conscious experience. However, this insight provides none of the consolation against the threat of time that initiated this line of metaphysical reflection. For whenever we reflect on time, we find ourselves apparently placed at a certain point within the objective order, with loss and death but no meaningful culmination ahead of us. The realization that the objective world is not itself flowing towards these outcomes – and that we only seem to occupy a temporal position within the objective world because of our misrepresentation of experience – does not help. For the misrepresentation is practically inevitable, even if in metaphysics we can see through it; metaphysical reflection detects it, but we still think of ourselves as having a life in the objective world.

Nevertheless time does provide a route to transcendence, which is what drew philosophy's attention in the first place. But the existence of transcendent reality has no effect on the truth of nihilism, and neither does it provide us with an alternative life which might somehow be atemporal; or at least free from the threat of time. Moreover, the transcendent hypothesis not only fails to neutralize worries about what time has in store for us, but actually corroborates a thought accentuating this threat; namely that of the arbitrariness of 'now'. For the hypothesis shows that we really cannot explain why transcendent reality seems to privilege one stage of the objective world as 'now' over another. This is a reflection of the inexplicability of there being transcendent reality at all; the same inexplicability we find in the fact that the universe exists.

However, considering time on the transcendent hypothesis does at least allow us to make sense of a certain recurrent theme in the Zen (Chan) tradition; one which might be thought to offer a little respite, if not consolation, in the face of time. Thus Dōgen, in the quotation which opened this chapter, says that an objective subject of change, such as firewood burning, is 'possessed of before and after', but is 'at the same time independent, completely cut off from before, completely cut off from after'. This is the insight we expressed in saying that objective time is an interpretation of transcendent being; things in the objective world are 'possessed of before and after', but the transcendent 'now' is 'completely cut off from before, completely cut off from after'. Dōgen also recognizes the inseparability of transcendent being (we know about) and 'now', which he characterizes by referring to 'being-time'; he says that 'each being-time is without exception entire time', which is to say that each interpretation of the transcendent 'now' brings with it the entire time of the objective world, and indeed 'the entire world'.⁴² The same idea is found in Hui-neng, who brings out its significance for the tradition in this passage:

There is no sign of origination in an instant, and there is no sign of passing away in an instant: with no more birth and death to be extinguished, quiescent extinction thus manifests. As it is manifesting, furthermore, there is no quantification or objectification of manifestation, so it is called eternal and blissful. This bliss has no subject that experiences it, yet there is none who does not experience it.⁴³

Thus when we reflect on transcendence – Hui-neng's 'instant' – we find a reality free of the forward-directedness of life within the framework. This may not strike us as 'blissful' if we do not regard the framework as oppressive – as something to free ourselves from by attaining a certain state of mind; albeit without then doing anything different, as the Chan/Zen masters typically insist we should not. But seeing it does allow us to transform boredom into metaphysical understanding.