

'THANK GOODNESS THAT'S OVER'

by D. H. Mellor*

There are two fundamentally opposed views of time. The opposition is over the nature of tense, i.e. the distinction between past, present and future and the seemingly inexorable way everything moves in time from future to past. This on one view is of the essence of time; on the other it is a complete illusion. The difference between the views is best expressed by means of what McTaggart (1908) called the *A* and the *B* series of temporal positions. The *A* series orders events by tense, ranging from the most future events, through the present, to the events of the remotest past. The *B* series orders them simply according to which is earlier, i.e. by their dates. The difference between the series is that the *A* series shows events moving from future to past and the *B* series does not. Everything constantly changes its *A* series position, whereas *B* series positions never change. Eighteenth century events, for example, were once future and are now past and becoming ever more so. They precede twentieth century events in the *A* series because they were present first, and both are moving all the time from later to earlier *A* series positions. In the *B* series, on the other hand, they do not move at all: eighteenth century events are forever just two hundred years earlier than twentieth century ones, and that's that.

The dispute about tense amounts therefore to a dispute about the reality of the *A* series. I follow McTaggart in thinking the *A* series is a myth, only, unlike him, I deny that this shows time itself to be a myth. I believe a tenseless view of time can be upheld, on which the reality of time consists entirely in the *B* series. I cannot argue the whole case for this here; I aim in this article only to meet one major challenge to the tenseless view. The challenge is to account tenselessly for the seemingly irreducible presence of experience, an aspect of it which for many people provides the strongest proof that tense is real. By the presence of experience I mean the fact that all our experience, our thought and our action takes place neither in the future nor the past, but always in the present, the fleeting moment between future and past.

In trying to explain away the presence of experience I shall rely without argument on another thesis of the tenseless view, namely that all tensed sentences have tenseless token-reflexive truth conditions. That is, provided they are all right in non-temporal respects, the truth value of tokens of

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tensed sentences are functions of how much earlier or later they are than the events they are about, the functions depending on the tense. Thus tokens of a present tense sentence are true only if sufficiently close in time to the event: my saying, for example, ‘Fred is getting married this week’ will be true just in case I say it in the same week as Fred’s wedding, and otherwise it will be false. Similarly, past tense tokens are true only if they occur appropriately later than the events they are about, and future tense tokens are true only if they occur earlier. The functions are more complicated for compound tenses like the future perfect, but the upshot is the same: fix the relative dates of token and event, and you fix the token’s truth value. All this is familiar enough, and should by now be beyond dispute, since it is easily demonstrable. At any rate, I shall take it all for granted in what follows.

The real question about tense is not whether this token-reflexive thesis is true, but whether it suffices to account for the *A* series. In particular, does it enable us to account for the presence of experience? It is by no means obvious that it does. When for instance I say that ‘It is now 1781’ is true in 1781 and ‘It is now 1981’ is true in 1981, I do not seem to have exhausted the relevant facts of tense. Indeed I seem hardly to have started on them, since I have not said which of these two centuries we are now in, a fact that, it hardly needs saying, makes a great deal of difference to our lives. And what tells us we are now in the twentieth century, not the eighteenth, is our experience, which is experience of twentieth century events. A world just like ours except that the present moment lay in the eighteenth century would be perceptibly a very different world from our own. Or so it seems. But if it is, the tenseless view of time I advocate is wrong. So I must try and explain the difference away.

The problem I face is nicely illustrated in a puzzle posed by Lewis Carroll in 1849 (Fisher, 1973, p. 25). He invites us to choose between two clocks, one being right twice a day, the other only once a year. Naturally we choose the clock that is more often right – and are disconcerted to get a clock that doesn’t go at all rather than one that merely runs a little slow! Yet we got the clock we asked for: the stopped clock is indeed right twice a day, whereas a slightly slow clock is almost never right. Moreover, as Carroll says, we know *when* the stopped clock is right, namely at the very time shown on its face, say two o’clock.

Even so, a stopped clock is not quite what we had in mind. Any sane man would prefer one that almost keeps time. But why? Carroll has given tenseless truth conditions for the unchanging token of ‘It is now two o’clock’ which the stopped clock is in effect emitting all the time. We can see what the clock says and we know when it is true. What more could we want to know?

What more we want to know, of course, is whether it is two o'clock *now*. Is two o'clock the date of our present *experience* of looking at the clock in order to see what the time is? We need not look at the clock to see that 'It is now two o'clock' is true at two o'clock — *that* is true all day. Those token-reflexive truth conditions never change. In particular, therefore, they do not convey the changing facts of tense that a stopped clock fails to tell us. And once we see that, we can see that they also do not convey what an accurate clock succeeds in telling us. It does indeed say '2.15' at 2.15, '3.30' at 3.30, and so on throughout the day. So far so good: these truth conditions do express what makes everything the clock says true. But again, none of these truth conditions ever changes. It is true all day long that the clock says '2.15' at 2.15, '3.30' at 3.30, etc. So far as their tenseless truth conditions go, there is nothing to choose between any of these tokens at any hour of the day or night. Citing them therefore never tells us what the clock itself tells us when we look at it, namely which of all these times is the *present* time. That is what we want a clock to tell us. And a slightly slow clock will nearly always tell us that more accurately than one which has stopped altogether. Assuming — what the absurdity of Carroll's tale anyway needs — that the slow clock is corrected periodically, it will never be more than a few minutes out in its dating of the present moment, whereas the stopped clock will mostly be hours out. So we ought after all to prefer the clock that goes.

That is the obvious, tensed, solution to Lewis Carroll's puzzle. What is wrong with a stopped clock is that most of the time it is very bad at telling us *A* series facts. My problem is how to say what is wrong with it without appealing to *A* series facts at all. But to do that, I must first tackle another puzzle, set explicitly by Arthur Prior (1959) as a problem for the tenseless view of time.

Suppose you have just had a painful experience, e.g. a headache. Now it is over, you say with relief 'Thank goodness that's over'. What are you thanking goodness for? On the face of it, the fact that the headache is no longer a present experience, i.e. is now past. So what you are thanking goodness for appears to be an essentially tensed fact, that the headache is past. That is presumably why you make your remark after the pain, and not during or before it. Can this fact still be explained when tensed facts are traded in for tenseless tokens with tenseless truth conditions?

Prior says not. In this case the true or false token is your saying 'That's over', referring to the headache, and the tenseless fact which makes it true is that it occurs later than your headache. All this is obvious and not in dispute. The question is whether this is enough to explain your thanking goodness. And the trouble is that this was as much a fact before and during the headache as it is now the headache is over. It always was and always

will be a fact that this particular token of 'That's over' occurs later than the headache it refers to. What is more, that fact could have been recognised as such in advance. In particular, you could have decided in advance to say 'That's over' after the headache, and known about the fact in that way. So if that were the fact you were thanking goodness for, you could just as well have thanked goodness for it before or during the headache as afterwards. Which of course is nonsense. So it seems you must be thanking goodness for some *other* fact, something that was not a fact at all until the headache ceased. The tensed conclusion appears irresistible; the pastness of the headache, for which you are thanking goodness, must be an extra fact over and above the tenseless fact that makes 'That's over' true. If your headache had not really had the *A* series property of presence, and had not now lost it, there would have been nothing to thank goodness for at all.

Yet again, as with Lewis Carroll's clocks, our tenseless token-reflexive truth conditions seem to miss the tensed character of experience. Nor is this a feature only of these somewhat contrived examples. Temporal presence seems to be an essential aspect of all experience. By 'essential' I mean essential to its being experience. If I only gave the dates of my experiences without saying which was happening to me *now*, I should on the face of it leave out precisely what makes them experiences. The headache which has just stopped, for example, is really no longer a headache at all, because it is no longer painful. Something can only be a headache, or an experience of any other kind, when it is present. The past event is only a headache in the dispositional sense in which an object in a dark room, though invisible, can be yellow. If the object *were* lit it would be yellow; if the event were present, it would be a pain in the head. But so far as actual pain goes, the event is merely a retired or Emeritus headache, not something still in business as the genuine experiential article. And that is why I thank goodness for its pastness: by ceasing to be present, it has ceased to be the unpleasant experience it was. Having a headache, in short, inevitably includes knowing — if one thinks about it — that it is present; and similarly for all other experiences.

On the other hand, experiences are also events in tenseless time. They have dates, as other events do. It is true that they are mental rather than merely physical events, but that does not prevent them having dates. For one thing, they occur at the same time as physical events, and acquire dates in that way. My headache, for example, may have started just as the clock struck six, and that fixes the first *B* series moment of its date.

So some events with dates, namely our experiences, we know are present events, and hence located firmly in both the *A* and the *B* series. But once some events are located in both series, all events are. The tenses of all other things and events follow from how much earlier or later they are than these

present events, and hence arise all the tensed facts that distinguish worlds differing in the date of their present moment.

Our knowledge of tenses, moreover, comes entirely from the presence of experience. Experiences tell us directly of their presence, and the rest of the *A* series we fill in from there. We know for example how long light takes to reach us from a celestial event we are now seeing, and that tells us how past it is, namely as far past as it is earlier than our experience of seeing it. Ultimately, therefore, as I remarked earlier, it is the directly perceived presence of experience which tells us what the tensed facts of our world are, i.e. that it really is the twentieth century we are living in and not the eighteenth.

The presence of experience is the crux of the matter. Without a tenseless account of it, tenseless truth conditions on their own will never dispose of tensed facts. That account I will now set out to supply. First, let us look again at Prior's puzzle, this time put slightly differently. Before, I acquiesced in the idiom of thanking goodness for facts, but in this case that idiom is tendentious. What a token of 'Thank goodness' really does is express a feeling of relief (not necessarily relief from or about anything, just relief). And the real question is when it is natural to have a feeling of relief in relation to a painful experience. The tensed answer to that question of course is: when the experience is past, rather than present or future. The tenseless answer can only be that it is natural to feel relief *after* a painful experience, i.e. at a later date, rather than during or before it. Now this may well seem a rather weak response. Why, after all, should relief be peculiarly natural after pain if not because the pain is now past and so, as we have seen, no longer pain? To this further question I confess I see no answer. But I also see no answer to the question: why feel relief only when pain has the *A* series position *past*, as opposed to being present or future? The answer is not, as one might suppose, that relief *cannot* be felt while pain is present and is thus still pain. It is not an *a priori* truth that relief is never felt, in relation to a pain, while the pain is present. Indeed I believe it not to be a truth at all. For one thing, masochists presumably feel relief when a future pain, for which they have been longing, at last becomes present - 'Thank goodness it's started' is what they would naturally say, not 'Thank goodness it's over'! And masochism, however deplorable, is certainly possible. No magic in temporal presence prevents relief being felt while pain is present. And short of *a priori* prevention which is not to be had, saying that relief normally occurs only when pain is past is no more explanatory than saying that normally it only occurs after the pain.

I conclude that the tenseless description of the phenomenon of relief, as usually following pain rather than preceding or accompanying it, is all right on its own. The tensed description makes the phenomenon no less

mysterious, and we have no good reason to insist on it. Nothing about the relation between pain and relief requires us to credit pains with tenses as well as with being earlier and later than other events.

And from the tenseless description, of relief usually coming after pain, I can forge a tenseless solution to Prior's puzzle. We need not after all claim to be thanking goodness for the fact that 'That's over' is true only after the pain. There is a much more credible tenseless story than that, which goes as follows. Basically, the remark 'Thank goodness that's over' is not a single statement but a conjunction, of 'That's over' and 'Thank goodness'. This can be seen in the fact that the conjuncts are just as naturally joined the other way round: 'That's over; thank goodness'. Now the first conjunct, 'That's over', has obvious and undisputed tenseless and token-reflexive truth conditions, and I have just stated the tenseless conditions in which the relief the second expresses is normally felt. The reason the two things are usually said together is partly that these two tenseless conditions usually coincide. The relief which 'Thank goodness' expresses is usually felt only when 'That's over', said of a pain, is true, namely just after the pain has stopped. However, there is a little more to it than that. The coincidence of these tenseless conditions is not merely a coincidence. The ending of the pain is also, we believe, the cause of our relief; and our saying 'Thank goodness' in conjunction with 'That's over' expresses, amongst other things, our recognition of this further tenseless fact.

These are the tenseless facts of the matter, and they explain perfectly well why most of us, wishing to tell the truth and not being masochists, will say 'Thank goodness that's over' only when our pain has stopped. Here I believe is an entirely adequate tenseless account of Prior's case. It does not after all compel us to admit tensed facts as well as tenseless ones. Pains only need to be causes of later feelings of relief; they do not also need to be in reality at first present and then past.

I have drawn out the tenseless treatment of Prior's case at some length in order to extract from it the ingredient needed to dispose in general of the presence of experience. That ingredient is a kind of self-awareness. The salient feature of Prior's case is that we not only have painful experiences, we also subsequently remember having had them. However relieved I feel, I shall not thank goodness for the removal of a pain I have forgotten about. The crux of the case is the recollection of pain, rather than the pain itself. Now this recollection, which is what 'That's over' expresses, is in part a token of a past tense judgment, the judgment that I was in pain in the recent past. But it is also in part a present tense judgment, the judgment that I am not in pain — or not in as much pain — now. I shall not say 'That's over', let alone 'Thank goodness', while I still feel the same pain. The present

tense awareness of being relatively free of pain is an essential ingredient in Prior's case; and this is the ingredient I need.

An awareness of being free of pain is, I contend, a token of a present tense type of judgment about my own experience, namely that the experience I am having now is painless. This token judgment is itself an experience, an event occurring in my conscious mind, but an event quite distinct from the rest of the experience it is about. I emphasise this distinction, because there is a temptation to identify our experiences with present tense judgments about them, a temptation which it is essential to my argument to resist. The source of the temptation is that we distinguish experiences from other events, virtually by definition, as those events we are directly conscious of. We may easily seem bound, therefore, both to be aware of our experiences, and to be right in our conscious present tense judgments about what they are. While I might, for instance, overlook or mistake the colour of my pen, I can hardly miss or mistake the actual experience of (say) seeing it to be red. My judgment about the experience itself is so closely tied to it that there is a serious risk of confounding the one with the other. Nonetheless the risk must be avoided, not just for the sake of my argument, but for a number of familiar and independent philosophical reasons which I need not digress here to rehearse. But one at least is apparent enough in this example, namely that I need not be making judgments all the time about every aspect of my experience. In particular, although I can hardly be *in* pain without noticing it, I can quite easily be free of pain without noticing it. Being free of pain does not force me to make the conscious judgment 'I am free of pain', even if I am — perhaps — bound to be right if I do so. So if I do make the judgment, that is an extra fact about me, over and above my lack of pain.

In short, to be aware that my present experiences are painless is to have a further experience, namely that of judging them to be painless. Since this judgment is about the experiences I am having now, it will have the token-reflexive truth conditions characteristic of the present tense. That is, the judgment will be true provided I am having only painless experiences at the very *B* series time at which I make it. And as for judgements of painlessness, so for judgements about all aspects of experience. If I judge myself to be seeing a red pen, for example, my judgment about that will likewise be true just in case I actually am seeing a red pen at the time I make the judgment.

Grant all this: now suppose I start making judgments, not about my present freedom from pain or about colours I am now seeing, but about temporal aspects of my experience. Specifically, suppose I judge that the experiences I am now having possess the *A* series property of being present. Notice that this restriction in the subject matter of my judgment, to the

experiences I am *now* having, does not make the supposition a tautology, at least not in terms of tense. Tenses, after all, must always be ascribed to events at a particular time, because the tense of events is always changing; and the events which happen now to be our experiences are no exception to the rule. Our question therefore has to be: what tense do these events *now* have. And it is by no means tautological that they will now all have the same tense as each other, let alone that they will all be in the present. On the face of it, we could now have as experiences events anywhere in the *A* series, past, present or future. Far from being a tautology, it seems in tensed terms to be a striking and impressive fact that events can only be experiences while they are present. It is indeed, as we have seen, the basis for all our knowledge of other tenses. It is what lets us infer from an event's now being an experience that it is now a present event, a conclusion that becomes in turn the premise from which the tenses of all other events and things are indirectly inferred.

However, no one actually infers the presence of experience. Rather, presence is itself an aspect of experience, i.e. something we are directly conscious of. (How else, after all, would we know that all experience is present?) So my judging my experience to be present is much like my judging it to be painless. On the one hand, the judgment is not one I have to make: I can perfectly well have experience without being conscious of its temporal aspects. But on the other hand, if I do make it I am bound to be right, just as when I judge my experience to be painless. The presence of experience, like some at least of its other attributes, is something of which one's awareness is infallible.

The real, relevant — and suspicious — difference between judgments of presence and painlessness is that whereas only some experience is painless, all of it is present. No matter who I am, or whenever I judge my experience to be present, that judgment will be true. This is the inescapable, experientially given presence of experience which I now have to explain away. And once experience has been distinguished from the tensed judgments we make about it, that is not hard to do.

We are concerned with token judgments to the effect that experiences we are now having possess the *A* series property of being present. Now any token which says that an event is present will be true if and only if the event occurs at the same *B* series time as the token does. These are the undisputed token-reflexive truth conditions of all such judgements. But in this case the events to which presence is attributed are themselves picked out by the use of the present tense. Not all our experiences, past, present and to come, are alleged to have this *A* series property, only the experiences we are having now. But these, by the same token-reflexive definition of the present tense, are among the events which *do* have the property now

ascribed to them: i.e. events occurring just when the judgment itself is made. So of course these judgments are always true. Their token-reflexive truth conditions are such that they cannot be anything else. In tenseless terms they are tautologies after all.

That is the tenseless explanation of the presence of experience. And for once it is not merely an alternative to a tensed explanation of the same thing. There is no tensed explanation of this phenomenon. If events can in reality have a range of tenses, I see no good reason for experience to be confined as it is to present events. In tensed terms, that is just an unexplained brute fact about experience. The nearest thing to a tensed explanation of the fact is given by the extreme view of St Augustine (e.g. Smart 1964, p. 58) and Arthur Prior (1970), that in reality only what is present exists at all. And of course, if only present events exist, then in particular real experiences will have to be present. To that extent the phenomenon is explained by this tensed view, albeit in an implausibly Procrustean way. What it does not explain, however, is how experiences differ in this respect from other events. Other events and things at least appear to be spread out throughout the whole of *A* series time: the events we see (especially celestial events) all over the past; the events we predict, or plan to prevent or to bring about, all over the future. Only our experiences, including our judgments (i.e. our thoughts), and our intentions, decisions and actions appear to be restricted to the present. Of that contrast, the token-reflexive account I have just given alone provides a serious explanation.

The tenseless fact is that experiences themselves, like all other events and things, are neither past, present nor future. But we can make past, present and future tense judgments about them, just as we can about other matters. We have indeed compelling reason to do so. In particular, we have compelling reason to make present tense judgments about our thoughts, actions and experiences as they occur. Without making such judgments we should be unable to communicate with each other (see Mellor, 1980, p. 148) and there is nothing tautological about our ability to do that. Nor are most of these judgments tautologies. There is no tautology in my being aware of having a headache. It may be a necessary truth of some kind that I have a headache when I think I have one; but even that is not a trivial truth. The only trivial truth is that the experiences I am having now possess the *A* series property of being present. That is not, after all, a profound experiential restriction on our temporal awareness of the realm of tense. It is nothing more than the fact that experiences which occur when we judge them to be occurring now are bound, by the token-reflexive definition of the present tense, to make that judgment true.

What then of Lewis Carroll's clocks? Consider first the clock that goes dead right. It is true that nothing tenseless about the clock itself picks out the present position of the hands; but something tenseless does, namely the time the clock is being looked at, say 2.15. If the clock is right, it will then be emitting what is in effect a token of the sentence 'It is now 2.15'. Assuming I believe the clock, that token will generate in me another, mental token of the same tensed type. Neglecting the time this message takes to get through to my brain, this means the clock will make me think 'It is now 2.15' *at* 2.15, so my thought will be true. That, in token-reflexive terms, is the virtue of an accurate clock: it generates in those who look at and believe it true tensed judgments about what time it is - which is what, after all, clocks are for.

A slightly slow clock generates in those who believe it tensed judgments that are not far out. That is, although they are actually false, most of their tensed consequences will be true. If I never need to know the time to more than a minute, a clock which is ten seconds slow will never deceive me in anything that matters. But a stopped clock can deceive people in matters of great moment, for mostly it is hours out. At most times of day, someone who looks at and believes it will make wildly inaccurate judgments about the time, judgments whose inaccuracy could cause him to be hours late for most important occasions. That is really what is wrong with a stopped clock. So even in token-reflexive terms, a slightly slow clock is much to be preferred. Lewis Carroll's puzzle does, after all, have a tenseless solution.

Finally, what of the difference between our twentieth century world and one with its present moment shifted back two hundred years? Actually, this is just the clock writ large, for we might as well ask how a good clock at 2.15 differs from the same clock an hour later. In tenseless terms, the answer is that the clock itself doesn't differ. Similarly, there is no tenseless difference between the two worlds. Indeed, there are not two worlds, any more than there are two clocks. There is only one world, with things and events scattered throughout *B* series time as they are throughout space, including both the eighteenth and the twentieth century.

But among these things and events are token judgments people make from time to time, token sentences thought, spoken and written, including tokens of tensed sentence types. And since, as a matter of tenseless fact, we are located within the twentieth century, so are all the token sentences we produce. Their tenseless truth conditions therefore differ by two centuries from eighteenth century tokens of the same types, and many of them will therefore differ also in truth value. Many eighteenth century tokens of 'The present King of France is Louis XV' are true therefore, because they occurred during the reign of that French monarch; whereas, as is well known, all twentieth century tokens of that particular type are false. There is the real

objective difference between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries: not a difference of tensed fact, but a difference in truth value of tensed tokens of the same type located in the two centuries.

Some, I fear, will not be satisfied by this token-reflexive account. If I gave tenseless truth conditions for every token sentence and judgment in the history of the world, they would still ask: but which of all these token judgments is being made *now*? To them I can only say that their question is itself a token, with a date that determines of what type an answer must be in order to be true. The judgments that are being made on the date of the question are those the true answer must give. So that answer too is made true by purely tenseless facts.

Of course the question can be asked again of any token answer: is it being given now? An endless regress is possible of such questions and their answers. But the regress is not actual, nor is it vicious. Every question in it has an answer made true by tenseless facts, because every question has a date. Those of us who eschew tensed facts are sometimes accused of trying to take an impossible eternal view of the world, neglecting our own immersion in the stream of time. But the accusation might more justly go the other way. It is those who cling to tense who fail to take seriously that all things are in time — and so are all our judgments about them. Things, events and judgments alike all have dates, dates that suffice to settle, without tensed fact, the truth or falsity of every tensed judgement there ever was or ever will be.

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