

Times of our Lives: Negotiating the Presence of Experience

Yuri Balashov

Department of Philosophy, University of Georgia, Athens, GA 30602, USA
yuri@uga.edu

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Abstract

On the B-theory of time, the experiences we have throughout our conscious lives have the same ontological status: they all tenselessly occur at their respective dates. But we do not seem to experience all of them on the same footing. In fact, we tend to believe that only our present experiences are real, to the exclusion of the past and future ones. The B-theorist has to maintain that this belief is an illusion and explain the origin of the illusion. The paper argues that this cannot be properly done unless one rejects endurantism in favor of the stage view of persistence.

1. Introduction

There is a sense in which all our experiences are known to occur in the present, as opposed to the past or future. When a certain experience occurs and is accompanied with a judgment concerning its A-property (the property of being present, past or future), the experience is invariably judged to be present. In this sense, all your experiences from different times—your reading this paper, your having breakfast earlier today, and your enjoying a concert tonight—are on a par. When they occur you perceive them as being present, never as being past or future. Call this feature Presentness.

Moreover, an experience known, in this sense, to be present—say, your having breakfast earlier today—is known to be present at the expense of others (your having dinner last night and your reading this paper now), which are believed not to occur in the present. By itself, this does not break the parity among our experiences from different times; it only makes the parity richer in content: not only is every experience known to occur in the present, it is so to the exclusion of its predecessors and successors. Call this feature Exclusion.

What really breaks the parity is knowledge that some experiences occur, not merely when they do (and when they are known to be present at the expense of others), but *now*. Your reading this paper is a case in point. Its occurrence does not appear to be just a matter of being correlated with a possible A-belief about its presentness, as opposed to pastness and futurity—a feature that it shares with your having breakfast this morning and your enjoying a concert later tonight. In addition, your reading this paper appears to be occurring *simpliciter*. Call this feature Occurrence.

Getting all three features of temporary experiences right is a major task of any theory of time. This task shall henceforth be referred to as the problem of the presence of experience (PE). It is immediately clear that PE fits in perfectly with most, if not all, tensed theories of time (the A-theories) but, especially, with presentism.¹ On the other hand, PE constitutes a problem for the rival tenseless theory of time (the B-theory). Most discussions of PE by B-theorists² have focused on the first two features of this phenomenon, Presentness and Exclusion. And to the extent that these discussions have touched upon the third aspect, Occurrence, they have tended to assimilate it to the first two. This, in our view, is an oversight. It is relatively easy for the B-theorist to account for Presentness and Exclusion—for the sense in which all experiences are known, *when they occur*, to be *present*, as opposed to *past* or *future* and, furthermore, are known to be so to the exclusion of their predecessors and successors. It is more difficult to account for Occurrence—for the sense in which some experiences are known to be *occurring*, or *present*, as opposed to *not* occurring, or *absent*. Occurrence is a distinct phenomenon that constitutes the *hard* problem of PE. The persistent tendency to evade it is partly responsible for the fact that what has often passed for a B-theoretic solution to the riddle of PE is not really a solution.

The above-noted ambiguity of the term ‘present’ may, of course, contribute to the temptation to overlook the hard problem of PE or to conflate it with the easy problem. Be that as it may, this essay argues that a real solution to the hard problem requires that the B-theory of time be supplemented with a controversial but increasingly popular way of thinking about ourselves and other persisting things known as *stage theory*. Far from all tenseless theorists are willing to make this further commitment. Even when it is made, some residual tension remains. The paper proposes to deflate it by taking a cue from what is,

¹ See, e.g., Smith 1994, Hestevold 1994, and Craig 2000. Henceforth the labels ‘tensed/tenseless theories’ and ‘A/B-theories’ are used interchangeably, in full understanding that although they are usually taken to pick out the same combinations of linguistic and ontological doctrines, they may have somewhat different emphasis and connotations. There does not seem to be general agreement on the usage of this terminology in the literature.

² See, in particular, Grünbaum 1976; Oaklander 1994; Williams 1994; Mellor 1981, 1998, 2001.

arguably, a similar case of negotiating other deeply entrenched intuitions, those concerning personal identity.

Since the commitment on which the paper insists requires rejecting the three-dimensional ontology of persistence (endurantism) in favor of its four-dimensionalist rival, and since the necessity of this commitment is precisely at issue,³ we shall begin by *assuming* endurantism and showing that, under this assumption, all serious B-theoretic attempts to solve the hard problem of PE fail.⁴ It will then be argued that stage theory's ability to do the job is well worth its theoretical costs.

2. Presentness and Exclusion

PE has been discussed in the literature in connection with other points of dispute between the tensed and tenseless theories of time, which include the status of temporal becoming (the "flow" of time) and the different attitudes toward past and future events. Although these three issues are interconnected, they are disentangled here and emphasis is placed on PE alone, which is challenge enough to warrant special consideration. If an acceptable B-theoretic response to this challenge is available, one can expect that such a response may suggest ways of resolving other problems in the phenomenology of B-time.

The above rough characterization of PE has highlighted three aspects of this phenomenon, which must now be examined in detail. The first aspect concerns the fact that all our experiences, insofar as they are accompanied by A-beliefs about their temporal properties, are believed to be present, and not past or future. On the face of it, this fact seems to give the A-theory an edge. On that theory, your reading this *is believed* to occur in the present because both the reading and the belief about its presentness *occur* at noon, and noon is now present. Similarly, your having dinner *was believed* to occur in the present, because both the dinner and the belief about its presentness *occurred* last night, when *it* was present. Any belief of this sort appears to reflect an objective A-property of the experience.

But it is well known that the truth of such A-beliefs, or A-judgments, is consistent with the denial of objective A-properties. The appropriate analysis

³ The present paper takes issue with B-theorists such as Mellor (1981, 1998) who explicitly endorse endurantism and reject the metaphysics of temporal parts. But the view expressed in the present paper is also in disagreement with those who, while not at all hostile to this metaphysics, do not think that getting explicitly involved in the debate about persistence and having to deal with the counterintuitive implications of four-dimensionalism are part and parcel of the real solution to the problem of PE.

⁴ *Non-serious* attempts typically boil down to pretending that the hard problem of PE does not exist or that it is not distinct from the easy problem. More on this below.

employs token-reflexive truth conditions of A-judgments applied to experiences. All that the B-theorist needs in order to explain your attributing the A-property of being present to your having breakfast earlier today is the B-fact that the experience of having breakfast occurs at the same time as the attribution in question and the general fact that A-beliefs about experiences tend to be veridical.⁵ Since this applies to all our experiences, each of them can be judged to be present, in this sense. Moreover, each experience, when it occurs, can be judged to be present to the exclusion of its predecessors and successors. Since the latter occur earlier or later than the time of judgment, they are not judged, at that time, to be present. If anything, they are judged not to be present.⁶ The following account of Presentness and Exclusion is thus perfectly consistent with the ontology of the B-theory:

(Presentness-and-Exclusion): When a particular experience occurs and a judgment about its A-property is made, this experience is judged to be present to the exclusion of its predecessors and successors.

All tenseless theorists who have discussed PE accept some version or other of this account. As aptly summarized by L. Nathan Oaklander, “There is nothing more, ontologically speaking, to the presence of experience than our being conscious of our experiences when they are happening” (1994, p. 346).

3. Occurrence

But there is something more, speaking phenomenologically. That Presentness-and-Exclusion or some equivalent statement do not capture all there is to PE has been noted or implied by some A-theorists (see, e.g., Hestevold 1994; Smith 1994; Craig 2000, pp. 139 ff). And their reaction is not merely doctrinaire. Your reading this paper is known (believed, judged) by you to be present to the exclusion of your having breakfast this morning and listening to the concert

⁵ See, in this connection, Mellor 1981, p. 54; 1998, pp. 31ff, 42–45; 2001, p. 57; Oaklander 1994, pp. 346–347; 2004, pp. 217–218 and 238–239. See also Grünbaum 1976, p. 479, Butterfield 1984, Williams 1994, and Le Poidevin 2004.

⁶ No such judgments need be explicit. Most of the time we simply have experiences and are not concerned to entertain beliefs about their A-properties. Yet whenever we do entertain them, we are guaranteed to be right in attributing presentness to our experiences occurring then, to the exclusion of those occurring before or after. Mellor notes, in this connection, that “my judging my experience to be present is much like my judging it to be painless” (1981, p. 53). Quentin Smith speaks, in a similar context, of “implicit,” “marginal” and “unreflexive” awareness of the temporal properties of the present experiences (1994, pp. 354–355).

tonight. But the same is true of your having breakfast. When it occurs, it is known to be present to the exclusion of last night's dinner and reading this paper. The phenomenology of Presentness-and-Exclusion goes hand in hand with the ontology of the B-theory, which puts the two experiences on a par: they are items tenselessly confined to their respective dates; each of them occurs when it does, to the exclusion of its temporal predecessors and successors. But reading this paper appears to have an extra feature that having breakfast does not: in addition to being known to be present when it occurs, the former, but not the latter, is known by you to be occurring *simpliciter*. It is known to be present in a more radical sense than that allowed by token-reflexivity. This conspicuous sense of presence, in which presence is opposed to *absence*, and not to pastness or futurity, cries out for explanation. But the tenseless view does not, by itself, provide a basis for it. Let us adopt the following description of this feature of temporary experiences:

(Occurrence): While all temporary experiences are, when they occur (and judgments about their A-properties are made), known to be present to the exclusion of their predecessors and successors, some experiences are, in addition, known to be occurring *simpliciter*.

As noted above, Occurrence has been persistently overlooked or downplayed by B-theorists. It is surely very tempting to conflate it with Presentness-and-Exclusion. According to D. H. Mellor, the challenge of PE boils down to the following: "Whoever I am, and whenever I believe my experience to be present, that now-belief is true. This is the inescapable presence of experience that we B-theorists must explain away" (1998, p. 44). The challenge is met as soon as I realize that my now-belief "that the experiences I am having now are present ... does not ascribe presentness to all my experiences, past, present and future, only to the ones I am having now, i.e. at the *B*-time at which I have this belief" (ibid.). But this cannot be the whole story, given that 'now' is, for Mellor, an indexical term similar to 'present' and, consequently, applying to all experiences alike. Your now-belief that your reading this paper is present does not, of course, ascribe presentness to the concert experience, because the belief in question does not occur at the *B*-time of the concert. But another now-belief does. And *that* now-belief *does* ascribe presentness to *that* experience. What needs explaining, however, is your knowledge, or belief, that you are *having* the reading experience (*as well as* the first now-belief) and not the concert experience (*along with* the second now-belief). And this explanatory question is quite distinct from the question of why *each* now-belief ascribes presentness to the experiences occurring at the time of the belief, and not to earlier and later experiences. Presentness-and-Exclusion is about a systematic *correlation*

between dated experiences and possible concurrent A-beliefs with a certain content. Occurrence, on the other hand, is about the *occurrence*, or taking place, of certain dated experiences (plus the correlated beliefs about them, if they are actively entertained), *rather than* of other such experiences (and the corresponding beliefs). Correlation is opposed to non-correlation, a possible (even if not very plausible) case of a mistaken now-belief attributing pastness or futurity to a simultaneously occurring experience. Occurrence, on the other hand, is opposed to non-occurrence, the sheer absence of a certain experience.

This is not to suggest that the indexical analyses of ‘now’ and ‘present’ are incorrect but only to note that, while such analyses serve the purpose of Presentness-and-Exclusion quite adequately, they are, by themselves, ill equipped to handle Occurrence. For they do not capture Occurrence’s essential feature: that in addition to being systematically correlated with other psychological tokens, certain experiences are also known to be simply occurring.

Mellor’s approach is representative of the way the tenseless camp has come to treat PE.⁷ This treatment emphasizes the first two aspects of this phenomenon, Presentness and Exclusion, at the expense of Occurrence, which is either overlooked or thought of as involving nothing more than the former two. Assimilating Occurrence to Presentness-and-Exclusion may (to borrow an expression from David Kaplan) engender an illusion of understanding it; but only an illusion. It is true that the tenseless theory has to be deflationary about many features of the manifest image of the world. Deflation, however, is not the same as disregard, especially when it comes to phenomenally perspicuous data.

On the other hand, the tendency to ignore or misidentify Occurrence is understandable. Presentness and Exclusion are features that find their natural place in the B-theoretic framework rather promptly. Occurrence, in contrast, is a phenomenon that, unembellished, appears to be alien to the tenseless view. In the foregoing, its distinctive aspect has been characterized by stating that present experiences are known to be occurring *simpliciter*, in addition to occurring when they are. But in the tenseless framework, these two modes of occurring amount to the same. The above characterization, therefore, has its limitations. The B-theorist who is initially insensitive to Occurrence may decide to dig in her heels and insist, at least for now, that she does not understand the difference. ‘*Simpliciter*’, however, is an apt label for what appears to be a *sui generis* phenomenon, and it will continue to be used. Since the B-theorist is under

⁷ See, in particular, Grünbaum 1976, Oaklander 1994, and Williams 1994. Interestingly, some A-theorists accept this approach. Craig Bourne (2002, p. 361), for example, notes that the indexical analysis of ‘present’ “is not the only solution to the Present Problem” (Bourne’s name for PE or something very close to it). Even if that is not the only solution, and not his preferred solution, Bourne clearly admits that it is a solution nonetheless. It can hardly be doubted that most other A-theorists would reject such a concession.

pressure to play down the significance of this phenomenon and deny its distinctive nature, it may be appropriate to take another brief tour of it (and set the stage for the ensuing discussion).

Suppose I experience pain at t_1 and pleasure at t_2 . Each of my experiences is known to be present when it occurs. Moreover, each of them is known to be present to the exclusion of the other (and the rest of my experiences). What then explains my current headache? Not the fact that it is now t_1 . There is no such fact (on the B-theory). Or is there? Could it be that the predicament is simply due to our inability to cope with self-locating or *de se* beliefs? Undoubtedly, I do have such beliefs about where I am, who I am, and when it is.⁸ But they, by themselves, do not get me out of the quandary. All the relevant self-locating beliefs locate me at *all* moments of my conscious life at which I entertain such beliefs, pleasant as well as painful moments. And all such beliefs are equally *mine*. What then breaks the symmetry among them? Why do I seem to have the belief that it is now t_1 *rather than* the belief that it is now t_2 ? Is it because I have it at t_1 and t_1 is now? But t_2 is equally now.

The quandary is essentially about the origin of the phenomenal disparity among the experiences that are ontologically on a par. It appears that the parity among them must be broken somewhere *en route* from ontology to phenomenology. How exactly does it come to be broken? (What is the parity breaking mechanism?) And why is it broken in this *particular* way, favoring t_1 over t_2 ?

There are two issues here. The first is a relatively easy one of why I am not experiencing an impossible combination of *both* pleasure and pain. The second is the hard issue of why I am experiencing pain *rather than* pleasure. The way to deal with the easy problem is simply to note that I exist in time not outside it and, hence, cannot have experiences from different times *totum simul*, but only “one at a time.” We do not have the “God’s eye” view of the world and its history. Our perspective is inherently temporal.⁹

But what defines a *particular* temporal perspective for me? My being present—*wholly* present—at a certain time, it would seem. But I am wholly present at multiple times, including both t_1 and t_2 . Why is my current perspective that of t_1 rather than t_2 ? It seems that t_1 and t_2 have an equal claim to represent my perspective, as I am wholly present at both. What then favors t_1 over t_2 ? Isn’t it the fact that it is now t_1 ? But there is no such fact.

What else, on the tenseless view, could make it the case that it is t_1 , and not t_2 , for me now? Could it be the fact that I am hearing the clock strike 10:00? Could I then not say that I am having pain and not pleasure—and therefore, it is now t_1 , and not t_2 , for me—because I am hearing the clock strike 10:00 and not

⁸ See Lewis 1979 and Perry 1979.

⁹ Cf. Oaklander 1994, p. 346.

12:00? But I also hear the clock strike 12:00, when I have pleasure. If so, it becomes unclear, again, why it is now t_1 , and not t_2 , for me. Should I say, perhaps, that my hearing the clock strike 10:00 is occurring, not just when it is (i.e., at 10:00 or t_1) but also *simpliciter*? Fair enough, but then we have not made progress, for what now needs explaining is again my knowledge that a particular temporary experience—my hearing the clock strike 10:00, as opposed to my hearing it strike 12:00—is occurring (*simpliciter*). And we cannot say that it is because it is now 10:00 (= t_1) for me, since that is precisely what we set out to explain by adding the clock to the picture.

It is clear that nothing that happens at t_1 , in addition to my pain, can explain why it is now t_1 for me and why I am suffering from pain.

4. Some Objections and Replies

Occurrence is elusive, and the temptation for the B-theorist to play down its distinctive character or assimilate it to Presentness and Exclusion is overwhelming. This section addresses some objections to the above description of Occurrence as a unique phenomenon.¹⁰

4.1. Throughout most of the preceding section, Occurrence has been described from the first-person perspective. It might be objected that this is potentially confusing. Indeed, one might argue that Occurrence owes its alleged distinctive character to improper conflation of first- and third-person reporting of experiences, and once these perspectives are carefully set apart, it becomes clear that Occurrence is nothing over and above Presentness and Exclusion. Suppose Melissa has pain at t_1 and pleasure at t_2 . She has just taken a painkiller and can describe her experiences in the present with no need for a temporal qualifier: “I am having pain, but later I will be having pleasure.” Paddy, who is a B theorist, can, of course, describe Melissa’s experiences with an attached temporal indicator: “Melissa has (tenselessly) pain at t_1 and pleasure at t_2 .” But Paddy can also describe Melissa’s experiences in relation to her own. If she happens to be reporting Melissa’s experiences at the same time that the latter is having pain (i.e., at t_1), Paddy can say “Melissa is having pain” and need not add any temporal qualifier. Isn’t that all there is to Occurrence? The reason Melissa’s pain can be described as occurring *simpliciter* is that our third-person description of her experience needs no temporal qualification. It is only when the experiencer and the reporter are the same person that one may be misled to think that there is something more to Occurrence. My pain at t_1 and pleasure at t_2 are experienced by me as present, exclusive, and occurring. But because I happen to be reporting

¹⁰ Thanks to the Referees for raising these stimulating objections.

my own experience at t_1 , I can describe my pain, but not my pleasure, without any temporal qualification. As a result, I am led to think that my pain is occurring *simpliciter* and that there is something more to it than occurrence at a particular time (the feature which my pain shares with my pleasure). But it can just as easily be something about the description that accounts for the relevant difference. And the difference can be made perspicuous by separating the experiencer from the reporter of experiences.

The objection can be answered by noting that the unique character of Occurrence cannot be grounded in the difference between the first- and third-person reporting of experiences. Just like other events, experiences are, on the B-theory, items tenselessly confined to their respective dates, and just like other events, all such dated experiences are on a par. Drawing the distinction between first- and third-person points of view can neither add to nor detract from this fundamental ontological fact. To see how this bears on reporting experiences, suppose Paddy describes Melissa's experiences both at t_1 and t_2 . Since Paddy reports Melissa's experiences at the same time that the latter is having pain (i.e., at t_1), Paddy can say "Melissa is having pain" and need not add any temporal qualifier. She issues this simple report at t_1 . Since Paddy also reports Melissa's experiences at the same time that the latter is having pleasure (i.e., at t_2), Paddy can say "Melissa is having pleasure" and, likewise, need not add any temporal qualifier. She issues that simple report at t_2 . Both experiences are properly correlated with their reports, and *each* pair of correlated events is believed, by both parties, to be present and exclusive, *when it occurs*. Does this explain Melissa's belief that she is *having* a throbbing headache and Paddy's correct and unqualified report of Melissa's headache? No. For Melissa's belief that she is having pleasure and Paddy's correct description of it (without any temporal qualification) are equally real. Why is then Melissa *having* pain *rather than* pleasure? Relatedly, why is Paddy's correctly (and unqualifiedly) *describing* Melissa's pain, *rather than* correctly (and unqualifiedly) describing the latter's pleasure? It won't do to say that this is because Melissa *happens* to be reporting Melissa's experiences at the same time that the latter is having pain (i.e., at t_1); for Melissa also *happens* to be reporting Melissa's experiences at the same time that the latter is having pleasure (i.e., at t_2).

One might protest that putting all the weight on the question (let us refer to it as the Question) 'Why is Melissa *having* pain *rather than* pleasure?' is inappropriate. Suppose it is now t_3 , a month after t_2 and a month and a day after t_1 . Melissa is absorbed in Zen meditation and is having neither pain nor pleasure; let us describe her present experience as *having* E_Z . Surely it would be incorrect for anyone—Melissa, Paddy, or any other third party—to pose the Question *simpliciter*, without adding a temporal indicator. But adding such an indicator would immediately erase all the difference between Occurrence and Presentness.

But there is nothing special about the Question. A similar question can be raised about any pair (and more generally, about any set) of Melissa's dated experiences. For example: Why is Melissa *having* E_Z , *rather than* pain? Why is she *having* E_Z , *rather than* E_X or E_Y ? Relatedly, why is Mr. A or Ms. B correctly (and unqualifiedly) describing her as having E_Z , rather than correctly (and unqualifiedly) describing her as having E_X or E_Y ? The temptation to respond by saying "Because it is now t_3 !" is almost irresistible. But the B-theorist must resist it, for t_1 and t_2 are equally now. This shows that describing the situation with an opening phrase "Suppose it is now t_3 ..." may be misleading unless the indexical nature of 'now' is clearly acknowledged. And once it is acknowledged, the Question (or any of its analogs) can be disposed of only at the cost of confronting an equally difficult question: Why is it now t_3 , and not t_1 or t_2 , for Melissa, or Paddy—or you and me, for that matter? (Recall the discussion at the end of section 3.)

Occurrence appears to have all the features of an unwanted visitor: one can push it out the door, but it creeps back in through the window. It emerges unscathed from our discussion of the difference between first- and third-person reporting of experiences. Since the first-person description is more vivid, it will continue to be used where appropriate.

4.2. Having experiences at times is in many ways similar to having intrinsic properties at times. Indeed, what does saying that S has experience E at t amount to, if not to attributing to S the property of having E at t or perhaps the property of being appeared to E-ly at t ? But it would be wrong to infer from this similarity that the *problem* of Occurrence (i.e., the hard problem of PE) is just an instance of the *problem* of temporary intrinsics and, therefore, any acceptable solution to the latter would, *ipso facto*, be a solution to the former. The problem of temporary intrinsics arises from the need to explain how one and the same object can exemplify incompatible intrinsic properties at different times. One solution that is open to the B-theoretic-friendly endurantist—Lewis's "second solution" (Lewis 1986, pp. 202–4)—is to construe temporary properties as relations to times. Far from resolving the riddle of Occurrence, this relationist approach (or its variants, variously known as "indexicalism" and "adverbialism") merely wraps it in additional metaphysical clothes. On Lewisian relationism, my having pain at t_1 and pleasure at t_2 is a matter of my bearing the relations *pain-at* and *pleasure-at* to t_1 and t_2 respectively. These relations are ontologically on a par, as are my experiences. But the latter are not on a par phenomenologically. I know that I am having an acute toothache. What then favors t_1 (*and my relation to it*) over t_2 (*and my relation to it*)? Isn't it the fact that it is now t_1 ? But there is no such fact unless it is taken to be the merely tenseless one that t_1 is when my pain occurs (gloss: t_1 is the time to which I bear *pain-at*). By the same token, however, t_2 is when my pleasure occurs (I bear *pleasure-at* to t_2). These facts do

not explain why it is now t_1 and not t_2 and, therefore, do not explain why my pain, and not pleasure, is *occurring*.

It is equally clear that variations on Lewis's "second solution," referred to above as "indexicalism" or "adverbialism," can do no better. Instead of making a moment of time a full-fledged relatum of a relation constituting a temporary property, the first variant makes time modify the *property* itself and the second the *having* of it. According to indexicalism, the correct metaphysical analysis of my having pain at t_1 and pleasure at t_2 proceeds by welding the times with the experiences and producing two seamless wholes, the time-indexed experience-constituting items *pain-at- t_1* and *pleasure-at- t_2* , which are then attributed to me. This tenseless attribution explains why I have pain at t_1 , to the exclusion of pleasure, and pleasure at t_2 , to the exclusion of pain. But it leaves unexplained why I am *having* the first *rather than* the second and why it is t_1 for me now *rather than* t_2 . Since I am *en rapport* with *pain-at- t_1* as well as *pleasure-at- t_2* , both items have equal right to determine my temporal perspective. The same result follows from the adverbialist analysis of the situation.

4.3. Another B-theoretic proposal to explain Occurrence¹¹ exploits an important difference between experiences and external events: the latter, but not the former, can easily be believed, when they are perceived, to be occurring in the past and not in the present. A distant explosion, as opposed to an acute pain, may be a case in point. The perception of the explosion can yield knowledge, or belief, of the occurrence of this event (i.e., the explosion) without knowledge, or belief, that it is present. Not so for the experience of pain. And there is a straightforward B-theoretic account of the difference: there is no time interval between having an experience and being aware of having it. By contrast, there may be a considerable time interval between an external event and the experience of it (and the awareness of experiencing it). Thus the occurrence of experiences, as perceived, is restricted to the present in a way the occurrence of external events is not. Hence the phenomenon of Occurrence.

But upon reflection, the phenomenon just described revolves within the boundaries of Presentness-and-Exclusion and does not exhibit the essential features of Occurrence. The fact that the (tenseless) occurrence of any dated experience—the experience of pain at t_1 or of pleasure at t_2 —is simultaneous with the awareness of this occurrence goes toward explaining, in B-theoretic terms, why we are bound to attribute presentness to it (as opposed to pastness) and thus distinguish it from its predecessors. By itself, however, this fact does not explain why I am *having* pain (and am simultaneously aware of its occurrence) *rather than* pleasure (while being aware of its occurrence). I am (often unreflectively; see note 6) aware of every experience that occurs in my conscious life. There is

¹¹ Suggested by the second Referee for this Journal. The objections discussed in Sections 4.1 and 4.2 are due to the first Referee.

no time interval between the occurrence of every such experience and my awareness of it. But why is a *particular* one of them *occurring* (along with my simultaneous awareness of its occurrence)? The fact that there is no time interval between having an experience and being aware of having it does not help with *this* question.

5. Stages of Experience

Occurrence was characterized above as a *sui generis* phenomenon that is apparently foreign to the metaphysics of the tenseless theory. In that sense, it is different from Presentness-and-Exclusion, which are quite straightforward in their acknowledgment of the ontological parity among different moments of time. The B-theorist must, therefore, maintain, despite all the odds noted above, that Occurrence—with its insistence that some moments of time and their contents are, in a certain sense, privileged over others—is, after all, an illusion. Now that we have the distinction between Presentness-and-Exclusion and Occurrence in hand, we can acknowledge that the latter is indeed an illusion, a mere appearance. At this point, however, we do not have an account of the origin of the illusion. Moreover, it may appear hopeless, in light of the foregoing discussion, to find it in the perfectly symmetrical tenseless terrain. The quite extensive set of realities to which the B-theory is committed seems to *overgenerate* the appearances. An egalitarian ontology seems to have no place for a conspicuously non-egalitarian illusion.

But the solution is not far away. Ontological egalitarianism can be preserved by adding still more content to it. At the same time, certain aspects of the non-egalitarian illusion must be negotiated. The overall strategy is suggested by Lewis's solution to the problem of temporary intrinsics (1986, pp. 202–4) and also by his short comment on *de se* beliefs: “[s]ome cases of belief *de se* can be better understood if we take the believer not as a continuant but as a more-or-less momentary time-slice thereof” (1979, p. 527). Lewis's sketch of his solution to the problem of temporary intrinsics has grown, in the last two decades, into an influential theory of persistence over time known as four-dimensionalism. His brief note on an important motivation for such a theory coming from the analysis of self-locating beliefs has, however, gone unnoticed by the tenseless theorists who are not friends of temporal parts, despite its relevance to the problem of PE.

The final diagnosis, then, is that the failure to cope with PE's third aspect, Occurrence, is due to the explicitly endurantist assumption, made by some tenseless theorists—that objects persist over time by being wholly present at multiple times—or to the assumption (typically left implicit) that the issue of persistence has no bearing on PE. While Mellor may be the only B-theorist who

has staunchly defended endurantism in the context of discussing PE (see, e.g., Mellor 1998, Chs. 4 and 8), other B-theorists who have contributed to this debate have been reluctant to draw a connection between it and the ontology of persistence. This is largely responsible for overlooking the hard problem of PE. This is not to suggest that those B-theorists would *hesitate* to reject endurantism and embrace its rival, the doctrine of temporal parts. Some B-theorists were, in fact, way too *quick* to embrace it, based on the problematic notion that the B-theory of time is *inconsistent* with endurantism (see, e.g., Le Poidevin 1991, §§1.2 and 4)—the notion challenged in much recent work (see, e.g., Sider 2001, §3.4 and references therein). It should be noted, however, that their approach to the problem of PE tacitly assumes that getting embroiled in the controversy over persistence (and having to deal with the difficult consequences of making momentary person-stages the bearers of temporary experiences) is *not necessary* for resolving the problem. The foregoing discussion clearly shows that such a minimalist stance can be maintained only at the cost of ignoring Occurrence.

It is now time to make the relevant commitment explicit by assigning different temporary experiences to numerically distinct objects, person-stages. On this approach, pain is had by my t_1 -stage and pleasure by my t_2 -stage. This proposal respects Presentness-and-Exclusion. Indeed, the experiences from different times are had by different stages; consequently, each experience is known, by the stage that has it, to be present to the exclusion of its predecessors and successors. More importantly, the proposal respects Occurrence. There is a clear sense in which my t_1 -stage's pain is occurring *simpliciter*. And my t_1 -stage's knowledge that pain *rather than* pleasure is occurring is easily explained by the fact that this stage *never* has pleasure. Indeed the only experiences it has are those that occur at t_1 . Furthermore, my t_1 -stage's knowledge that it is now t_1 (rather than t_2 , say) can be explained along the same lines. The relevant self-locating belief locates my stage at the only time at which it exists.

The approach just outlined requires rejecting endurantism in favor of *stage theory*, a variety of four-dimensionalism that identifies ordinary objects with momentary stages.¹² Stages persist by “exduring”¹³—by standing in appropriate relations to other stages. Such relations also serve as the ground of *de re* temporal predication.¹⁴ In the case of persons, the relation in question is, of course, that of

¹² For exposition and defense of stage theory, see Sider 2001, §5.8; Hawley 2001. See also Varzi 2003 for a recent review.

¹³ The term due to Haslanger (2003).

¹⁴ Consider a proverbial poker that is hot at t_1 and cold at t_2 . Stage-theoretically, this means that the poker's t_1 -stage is hot. But this object, the poker stage, *is* the poker. And this object *will* persist through t_2 and *will* be cold then. This amounts to there being a distinct object, the poker's t_2 -stage, which is cold *simpliciter*. But it is the first object that has the temporal property *being cold in two hours*, in virtue of standing in an appropriate relation to the second.

psychological and/or physical continuity with the right sort of cause. Such a relation need not be one-one: a person (her t_1 stage) may have more than one temporal counterpart at another time.

How short are object- and especially person-stages? Are they instantaneous? Or should we rather think of them as having some finite extension in time? The question becomes important in the context of attributing temporary experiences to person-stages. Although the view that object-stages have non-zero duration could perhaps be coherently developed, it is natural to require that stages be as fine-grained as possible change (Hawley 2001, p. 50), which means that they must be instantaneous. Should we then attribute experiences to momentary person-stages? On the face of it, this looks problematic. Instantaneous person-stages do not last long enough to have experiences such as pleasure or pain. The latter take longer than an instant. Sider offers the following response:

Having [an experience] does indeed require *having had* certain features in the past. This is not inconsistent with the stage view, which interprets the past having of the relevant features as amounting to having temporal counterparts that have those features. In order to have [an experience], a stage must stand in an appropriate network of counterpart relations to other stages with appropriate features. Thus, the property *having [an experience]* is a highly relational property.^[15] It nevertheless can be instantiated by instantaneous stages. (Sider 2001, pp. 197–198)

To be sure, an *isolated* instantaneous stage of me could not have an experience. But neither could an enduring person existing only at an instant (cf. Hawley 2001, p. 55). And just as enduring objects normally exist for longer than an instant (for the endurantist), object stages are normally surrounded by other stages of that object (for the stage theorist). The upshot is that although my pain (even a sharp pain) lasts for an extended interval of time rather than an instant, one can legitimately attribute it to each of my instantaneous stages from that interval.

Let us now turn to an aspect of stage theory that may seem especially troubling.

Each of the two poker-stages *is* the poker at a corresponding moment of its existence. For details, see Sider 2001, pp. 193ff and Hawley 2001, pp. 41ff.

¹⁵ The kind of “relationism” involved in the attribution to momentary stages of temporary properties that take longer than an instant to be exemplified is, of course, quite different from what was described above as “Lewisian relationism,” his “second solution” to the problem of temporary intrinsics.

6. Tension

I am a stage. But *which* one: my t_1 -stage, t_2 -stage, or any other? The answer, of course, should be: *all* of them. But how can it be, given that different stages are numerically distinct individuals? If I am my t_1 -stage and I am my t_2 -stage, doesn't it follow, by the transitivity of identity, that my t_1 -stage = my t_2 -stage? That would be problematic: two distinct things cannot be one. Fortunately, this result does not follow. Consider the statements, 'Yuri is his t_1 -stage' and 'Yuri is his t_2 -stage'. Contrary to what they might wrongly suggest, there is no me over and above my t_1 -stage, my t_2 -stage, and so on. Rather 'Yuri' is a proper name that refers to different person-stages and is used to talk about a particular person at different times. All such stages are the *same person*, where sameness should, in this case, be construed, not as numerical identity, but as an appropriate genidentity relation.¹⁶

Armed with this idea of multiple reference, let us go back to our example. My t_1 -stage has the experience of pain, knows this experience to be present to the exclusion of others, and, moreover, knows it to be occurring *simpliciter*. But the same is true of my t_2 -stage and its experience of pleasure. What, then, can we say about *me*? Why am *I* having pain *rather than* pleasure? And why is it t_1 for *me* now, *rather than* t_2 ? It would appear that both my stages have an equal claim to represent my temporal viewpoint. In fact, all my stages have this claim. But if so, why do I have one distinctive set of experiences *rather than* the other? Doesn't the specter of Occurrence rear its ugly head again?

Notice, however, that the picture just sketched suggests, again, a wrong image, despite the warning issued a moment ago. I am not an entity *separate* from my stages and somehow delegating to them the privilege of representing my temporal perspectives. Such perspectives—all of them—belong to me directly. By contrast with the endurantist's situation, however, there is a sense in which the subjects of such perspectives are distinct. The difference is crucial, as it allows the stage theorist to treat Occurrence as an illusion and at the same time respect this illusion as a pervasive phenomenon. But clearly, it also jars with introspection.

Put yourself in my shoes. Are you in pain or pleasure? If you take the stage view seriously, it seems that the right thing to say is that you are in pain and you are in pleasure. But it is not the case that you are in pain and pleasure. Is your pain occurring *simpliciter*? It would appear that it is, for its subject—your t_1 -stage, which is you—can't help being in pain and is never in pleasure. But the same is true of your pleasure, whose subject (your t_2 -stage, you) can't help having pleasure and is never in pain. It appears that while each of your stages complies

¹⁶ On "sameness through time" as distinct from the sameness of identity, see Hawley 2001, pp. 62ff.

with Occurrence, you do not. The crux of the problem is the need for you to identify somehow with *all* your stages. But if introspective evidence is to be respected, the most you can do is to identify with *any* one of them, to the exclusion of the rest.

Upon reflection, what prevents you from doing both things is, once again, the lingering belief that you are something *over and above* your stages. This belief is strong. But it is negotiable.

7. Fission

Derek Parfit's analysis of fission provides an influential recipe for negotiating deeply entrenched intuitions: that personal identity is a real fact over and above physical or psychological continuity, and that survival is an all-or-nothing matter. Parfit's analysis also holds the key to deflating the residual tension inherent in the stage-theoretic analysis of PE. In fact, the two cases appear to be of a single stripe.¹⁷

Recall the predicament exemplified in the fission scenario. I am physico-psychologically continuous with (or, in a more general case, R-related to) two future persons, Lefty and Righty. But neither of them is, of course, identical with me. I can say that I survive both as Lefty and as Righty, but I cannot say that I am either of them. Upon reflection, however, I need not worry about it: the relevant sort of continuity¹⁸ (or R-relation) is as good as survival can get.

Now project yourself into the mind of Lefty. Lefty is inclined to think that he is me. And as long as he does not know about the existence of Righty (and perhaps even if he does), Lefty is under the illusion that he is the *unique* person who is me. From Lefty's perspective, he is the only such person. Righty, of course, has the same illusion. Their common illusion is phenomenally solid. But if we know all the facts about the scenario, the illusion is explained away as what it is: an illusion.

Let us now put Parfit's scenario in explicitly stage-theoretic terms. From the perspective of one of my pre-fission stages, I can truly say that I *will be* Lefty, even though I cannot say that I *am* identical with him. What makes my saying it true is that there is a later stage of me—the stage to which I bear the R-relation—

¹⁷ The relevance of Parfit's analysis of personal identity to the issue under discussion has, in our knowledge, first been mentioned, albeit in passing, by Simon Saunders in the context of drawing an analogy between the indexical treatment of actuality in the many-worlds interpretation of quantum mechanics and the indexical analysis of 'present' in the eternalist framework of Minkowski spacetime (Saunders 1995).

¹⁸ Here it is appropriate to abstract from the controversial question of whether the relevant sort of continuity is physical or psychological or a combination of both. All that matters is that the relevant sort of relation is not identity.

that is (strictly identical with) Lefty. Since I *will be* Lefty, I *will have* his later experiences. On the other hand, I also *will be* Righty and *will have* his different experiences. I am, however, happily precluded from saying that I will be *both* Lefty and Righty and will have an impossible combination of both experiences. Lefty and Righty are distinct entities, even though my relation to both is intrinsically the same (the R-relation). Lefty's illusion can now be recast as follows: he believes that he is the unique person who *was* me. The same goes for Righty. I can explain their illusions even though I myself may have them later, when I "become" Lefty and also "become" Righty (if I forget my Parfit in the interim).

To sum up, in virtue of being R-related to me, Lefty is naturally led to a mistaken belief that he is *the* person who was me. Righty has the same illusion. But if we know all there is to know about the situation, we can negotiate Lefty and Righty out of their illusion. We can also show that it may be difficult for them to dispose of it on their own, because of the phenomenal blinders put on their minds' eyes.

The phenomenal aspects of Occurrence in the analysis of PE can be negotiated in a similar fashion.

8. Occurrence Negotiated

How can I have all my experiences from different times in a way respecting Occurrence, as well as Presentness-and-Exclusion, without, however, sliding back to the A-theory? As already indicated, the way to make it possible is to attribute the experiences occurring at different times to different items: distinct person-stages. From each stage's perspective, its experiences are believed to be present to the exclusion of others. Moreover, they are *believed* to be occurring *simpliciter*. But that does not mean that any temporary experience is ontologically favored as being objectively present. Rather each person-stage lives in its own "temporal world" and every experience is present, as well as believed to be occurring *simpliciter*, at its corresponding date, because the belief in question is uniquely possessed by the stage existing at that date.

This approach treats Occurrence as a phenomenon inherent in every moment of time (more precisely, in every moment at which the agent has experiences and makes judgments about their presence). This restores parity among the experiences residing at different times. In that respect, the current strategy is in line with the indexical account of temporary experiences, which has long been promoted by B-theorists. But that account by itself does not provide a plausible phenomenological explanation of what goes on until the relationship among items (persons at times) having temporary experiences is downgraded

from identity to the relevant kind of continuity (with the right sort of cause). This serves to deflate the belief that some experiences, those occurring at “the” present, are privileged, not only *qua* being present (as opposed to past and future), but also *qua* occurring (as opposed to non-occurring). The belief is still in place, but its claim to veracity is undermined. Just as the familiar difficulties raised by Parfit-style scenarios for those who are committed to strict personal identity are overcome once this commitment is abandoned, the apparent tension involved in placing all my distinct temporal perspectives on the same phenomenal footing must be looked upon as resulting from essentially the same wrong conception of the self, which involves strict transtemporal identity.

All my stages have equal claim to be me but they are numerically distinct and each is a focal point of a temporally restricted perspective. This is analogous to the phenomenal perspectives of Lefty and Righty, each of whom has equal claim to *have been* me. And Lefty’s illusion that he alone fits the bill is quite similar to my present illusion that I only have the experiences occurring in the unique present.

In concluding this section, it should be emphasized that the use of fission as a model for resolving the residual tension inherent in the stage-theoretic analysis of PE has abstracted from a host of contentious issues surrounding Parfit’s metaphysics of the self (see, e.g., Dancy 1997). Such issues are important in their own right, but they are quite orthogonal to the concern raised above. Most of them revolve around the very first step in the development of Parfit’s metaphysics, his critique of the idea of strict personal identity. Since stage theory of persistence parts company with this idea right from the start, arguing about its retention is not on the agenda. Rather, the gambit is to show that, along with other advantages of stage theory, its ability to handle PE is well worth the price.

9. Conclusion

The hard problem of PE lies in Occurrence, not Presentness-and-Exclusion. To handle it properly, the B-theorist needs to commit to a rather controversial view of persistence and to deal with the tension arising from the identification of persons with momentary stages. If the arguments developed here are sound, this requires more work than has been assumed in extant discussions.¹⁹

¹⁹ I am indebted to Dean Zimmerman for detailed comments on an earlier draft, to the Editor for helpful suggestions, and to both Referees for insightful criticisms. Versions of this paper were presented at the University of Georgia’s philosophy colloquium (Athens, GA, November 2004) and the philosophy of time society meeting (Boston, MA, December 2004). My thanks to these audiences, and especially to John Bigelow and Matthew Davidson, for stimulating

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