

Book Reviews

Yuval Dolev, *Time and Realism: Metaphysical and Antimetaphysical Perspectives*. Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2007. ix + 237 pp.

In this interesting and engaging book, Yuval Dolev takes up what many philosophers regard as a key issue in contemporary metaphysics: the debate between “tensed” and “tenseless” theories of time. The subject matter is a familiar one, but the direction in which Dolev tries to take the debate is not. Rather than endorse either theory, he rejects both of them, and argues that the entire debate is based upon a confusion. Once we look closely at the matter, we are told, it turns out that “we don’t really know how to understand either theory” (60). This negative result is the cornerstone of the argument, but the overarching aim of the book is more positive. By overcoming the dualism between the “physical” time studied by analytic philosophers and the “human” time most continental philosophers are concerned with, Dolev hopes to build “a bridge between the analytic and the continental traditions in the philosophy of time” (viii). If we abandon the narrow obsession with tensed and tenseless theories, he claims, we can appreciate what a study of phenomenology can contribute to a philosophical understanding of time.

Dolev’s argument has three main parts. Chapters 1–3 set the stage by arguing that the debate between tensed and tenseless theories of time is at heart a disagreement about *ontology*. The pivotal chapter 4 then tries to show that the ontological question that both theories aim to answer is meaningless because it rests on a misuse of the word ‘real’. Chapters 5 and 6 are about what a post-ontological philosophy of time might look like.

“Tensed” and “Tenseless” Theories of Time

Apart from trying to reveal the ontological nature of the tensed/tenseless debate, chapters 1–3 also serve an important secondary purpose. They prepare us for the imminent dismissal of both views, by showing that the debate between them is not making much progress, anyway. Dolev carefully reviews the compelling arguments that can be given on either side, thus

leaving us with the impression that the debate is at a stalemate. This requires an explanation, for how could there be good arguments in favor of two diametrically opposed theories? Dolev's diagnosis in chapter 4 will be that both sides are trying to answer an ill-posed question about what is real. But all of this is based on the assumption that the competing arguments presented in chapters 1–3 are in fact concerned with the same thesis, and I do not think that is correct.

What Dolev calls “the” tensed and tenseless views of time are really two clusters of related but independent theses, many of which are not overtly ontological in nature. Here are some of the claims that get attributed to the tensed view:¹

- (A) Pastness, presentness, and futurity are genuine *properties* of events (or objects).
- (B) There are *temporal propositions* whose truth-values vary over time.
- (C) There are *tensed facts* corresponding to temporal propositions.
- (D) Only present objects exist (*presentism*).
- (E) Time *flows*.

Thesis (A) is part of what is at issue in McTaggart's paradox, which Dolev discusses in section 2.1. Yet even if we accept that there are such tensed properties—which McTaggart of course denies—this does not seem to commit us to all of the other theses. Take the presentist thesis (D). If there is a property of pastness, it is presumably possessed by past events. Since past events are things that happen to past objects, whose existence the presentist denies, it would appear to be far more natural for an advocate of tensed properties to *accept* past and future objects. Otherwise, what would he attribute these properties to?

Conversely, someone who defends the presentist thesis (D) would seem to have little reason to accept thesis (A), which is concerned with the features of entities that he wants to expel from his ontology. This is not to say that the two theses are incompatible. There are some attempts at fleshing out the presentist thesis that try to link (A) and (D). For example, John Bigelow argues that statements that are ostensibly about past objects (such as “Caesar crossed the Rubicon”) are really about tensed properties of

¹ Dolev is not alone in lumping these disparate theses together; a large number of contemporary philosophers of time make the same mistake.

presently existing objects (being-such-that-Caesar-crossed-the-Rubicon).² But unless the presentist endorses this somewhat implausible view about the meaning of past-tense claims, there is no reason why she must postulate tensed properties. In fact, Dolev himself grants this point later in the book, when he distinguishes between (A) and (D), and notes that they are different theses (73f.).

In defense of thesis (B), Dolev argues that temporal propositions are indispensable in accounting for certain propositional attitudes, notably dread and anticipation (32f.). The day before yesterday, I dreaded that the dentist would pull out my teeth. I no longer dread this today because yesterday he did as I feared and today I have no teeth left that he could pull out in the future. One way of accounting for this is in terms of a temporal proposition—*that the dentist will pull out my teeth*—which was true the day before yesterday, and is no longer true today. The varying truth-values of this proposition would explain my changing attitudes towards it. Whether or not one is persuaded by such considerations to accept the existence of temporal propositions,³ this tells us very little about the other theses on our list. Take D. H. Mellor, who advocates a tenseless theory of time. If he really wanted to, Mellor could accept temporal propositions along with the eternal propositions he does accept. As long as he does not also claim that temporal propositions correspond to tensed *facts*—which is the independent thesis (C)—there is nothing of substance that he would need to give up. Of course, if one endorses thesis (C), it might be hard to resist accepting (A) as well, but this would still provide little reason for accepting the presentist thesis (D).

Thesis (E) raises somewhat different issues. Each of the preceding theses suggests a different account of the flow of time. According to (A), the flow of time would consist in objects or events undergoing change with regard to their tensed properties. An advocate of (B) might say that flow consists in propositions changing their truth-values, and a proponent of (C) could say that the flow of time manifests itself through a change in the totality of all facts. Now, it is not clear whether (B) would yield a very interesting

² “Presentism and Properties,” in *Philosophical Perspectives 10*, ed. James Tomberlin (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1996), pp. 35–52.

³ Many other propositional attitudes, notably belief, seem more naturally accounted for in terms of eternal propositions, which do not change their truth-value over time; see Mark Richard, “Temporalism and Eternalism,” *Philosophical Studies* 39 (1981): 1–13.

sense of flow, or whether the account derived from (C) would look all that different from that derived from (A). What *is* clear, though, is that all of these senses are different from the account of flow that the presentist thesis (D) would provide. Only on this view would the flow of time acquire a distinctly *ontological* reading. The flow of time would consist in objects coming into and going out of existence.

In addition, there are accounts of the flow of time that are not easily associated with (A)–(D). One is George Schlesinger’s moving NOW view, discussed in section 3.1, the other is the “Solipsism of the Present Moment” from section 3.2. Since the latter is a novel account of flow that is due to Dolev, let me say a few words about it.

Dolev repeatedly appeals to the epistemological differences between past, present, and future, which he calls the “perceptual and causal inaccessibility” of the past (see, e.g., 10, 31f.). He takes it to be the task of a metaphysical account of time to explain why it is that only present objects can be perceived, and his main arguments against “the” tenseless view of time is that it cannot adequately perform this job. But it is not obvious that there is anything here that needs explaining. It is true at *every* time that only objects that exist *then* (or shortly before) can be perceived *then* and that our only access to the events and objects prior to *that time* are through memory. Yet if every time is epistemologically “special” then none of them is, and we do not need a substantial metaphysical theory that explains the difference between the present and other times.⁴

However, I agree with Dolev’s central claim in section 3.2 that we do get a substantial metaphysical thesis if we wed this epistemological asymmetry to a verificationist theory of meaning to yield a Dummettian anti-realism. If reality cannot outstrip verifiability in principle then it must change along with our changing epistemic situation. In this case, it is not just our epistemic location relative to the object of investigation (the time-series) that is changing, but also the object of investigation itself. This gives us a novel and interesting account of the flow of time that is quite different from the accounts sketched above. But also this account does not reduce to a distinctly ontological thesis, and it does nothing to support presentism. While different things would be real at different times, reality would always include some

⁴ Surprisingly, Dolev comes to the same conclusion in section 5.2, but his argument is different from the one sketched here.

past objects of which we have sufficient observable traces. As time goes by, there will be less and less evidence for claims about a particular past event, leading to reality getting “thinner” towards the remote past. But this does not provide a principled distinction between the present and other times, since many claims about the past would be as meaningful as some claims about the present or the future.

In sum, it does not seem correct to characterize the debate between tensed and tenseless theories as an *intractable* disagreement about one *ontological* question. Rather, there is a whole range of different theses at stake. Some of them are ontological in nature, but they are not concerned with the same entities. Some of them are about the existence of certain propositions and facts; others are about properties and objects. Moreover, there are also some theses that do not seem to be ontological at all, such as Dolev’s “Solipsism of the Present Moment.” The seemingly compelling arguments that Dolev adduces in support of either side of the debate are concerned with different theses. If that is right, though, then it is not clear that the debate is at a stalemate.

The Meaninglessness of the Debate

These remarks about chapters 1–3 do not entirely undercut Dolev’s discussion in the remainder of the book. One of the issues at stake is indeed about an ontological dispute, namely, the debate about presentism, and that is what the pivotal chapter 4 focuses on, anyway. Dolev’s main complaint in chapter 4 is that both the presentist and his opponent make anomalous and therefore *meaningless* use of the word ‘real’ (69ff.).

Dolev’s discussion departs from J. L. Austin’s famous remarks about ‘real’ in *Sense and Sensibilia*, which he quotes on page 72:

A definite sense attaches to the assertion that something is real, a real such-and-such only in the light of a specific way in which it might be [...] *not* real. “A real duck” differs from the simple “a duck” only in that it is used to exclude various ways of being *not* a real duck—a dummy, a toy, a picture, a decoy, &c.; and moreover I don’t know *just* how to take the assertion that it’s a real duck unless I know *just* what, on that particular occasion, the speaker has in mind to exclude. [...] the function of “real” is not to contribute positively to the characterization of anything, but to exclude possible ways of being *not* real.

According to Dolev, the problem with the debate about presentism is that neither side provides such a contrastive sense of ‘real’. Here is what he says

about the presentist's opponent, the "eternalist":

When we are told that past people are just as real as present ones [...], what could this mean? Past events and people are supposed to be "real" as opposed to what? To being decoys? Fakes? Fictions? Well, we are told that they are just as real as present ones. But for this to be helpful we need to know what is meant by the assertion that present people are "real." [...] What is necessary is a specification of a form of being *not real* that is excluded by the assertion that present people are "real." [...] none of the familiar ways of being not real is relevant here. (72)

Presentism is said to run into similar difficulties:

The tensed assertion "only what exists now is real" fails to manifest either of the above features of the uses of "real": we are not told a real *what* is at issue, nor what is the specific way this thing may be *not real* that is being excluded by the tensed tenet. In other words, we have not been convinced that we understand the tensed use of "real." (73)

Dolev concludes that we do not really understand either theory:

We cannot, in any way, attach a sense to the statements making up the basic tenets of both theories in the metaphysics of time. This conclusion should be understood strictly: we do not know what to make of either the metaphysical thesis that "only the present is real"; or of the opposed thesis that past, present and future events are "equally real." If these theses are supposed to respectively constitute "Yes" and "No" answers to the question: "Is the present 'ontologically privileged' with respect to the past and future?" then our conclusion is that we have no well-formed answer to this question. (113)

This discussion (which takes place in section 4.2) is couched in terms of our pre-theoretical notion of 'real'. In sections 4.3 and 4.4, Dolev argues that 'real' cannot be taken to be a theoretical term, either.

Perhaps it is true that both sides are playing fast and loose with the word 'real', but it is not clear that this undermines the entire debate. For one, we could easily avoid these problems by rephrasing the issue in terms of what *exists*, rather than what is "real." This would be more appropriate for ontological dispute, anyway, and to make sense of the claim "*x* doesn't exist" we do not need to specify a *way* in which it does not exist. All we would be saying is that there is no such thing as *x*. So if the problem lies with the contrastive nature of 'real', let us just use 'exists', which does not have this feature.

Moreover, the situation does not seem to be symmetric between the presentist and the eternalist. Before offering a theory of his own, the

eternalist could reasonably demand that the presentist explain how we are to understand the ‘exists’ in his thesis that “only present objects *exist*.” It is not clear that the presentist has a good answer to this question. If the ‘exists’ were just the present tense of the verb *to exist* then his thesis would amount to the trivial observation that only present objects exist *now*. There would be nothing to disagree about, and no reason for the eternalist to come up with a rival theory. A second possibility would be to give the ‘exists’ an omnitemporal reading, and to render the thesis as the claim that nothing ever *has, does, or will exist* that is not present. But in this case the presentist thesis would be obviously false. There would again be no need for the eternalist to come up with a rival theory. It would suffice to present one of the many counterexamples, such as Julius Caesar, who *did* exist, but is not present.

We do not really have a debate until the presentist comes up with a reading of ‘exists’ on which his thesis is neither trivially true nor obviously false.⁵ Such a reading would also have to provide us with an account of the semantic values of the singular terms occurring in true statements ostensibly about past objects, such as the ‘Julius Caesar’ in “Julius Caesar crossed the Rubicon.” These semantic values might be the present traces of these past objects or some weird properties of presently existing objects. Or perhaps we could try to treat ‘Julius Caesar’ like a fictional object. It is not at all obvious which of these, if any, are plausible, but what is important here is that this is a problem for the *presentist*. The eternalist can sit back and wait. Once the presentist has decided on one such account, the eternalist could just present his view as the negation of that thesis. At this point, the eternalist could even phrase their dispute as being about what is *real* in the ordinary, contrastive sense of the word. The eternalist view is that past objects are real objects, *rather than* whatever the presentist claims ‘Julius Caesar’ stands for (i.e., present traces, fictional object, or whatever).

⁵ I argued elsewhere that there is no coherent way of understanding the presentist’s thesis on which it is neither trivially true nor obviously false; see “The Presentist’s Dilemma,” *Philosophical Studies* 122 (2005): 213–225; “Worlds and Times,” *Notre Dame Journal of Formal Logic* 47 (2006): 25–37. If that is right then the debate between the presentist and his opponent is indeed based on a confusion, namely, the assumption that there is a substantial presentist thesis to be discussed. But this confusion would all be the presentist’s fault and the debate would get dissolved in favor of the eternalist.

Extensionless Instants

Chapter 5 takes up two separate issues. The first claim, defended in section 5.1, is that we must abandon the view of time as composed of extensionless instants. “In rising above the ontological assumption,” Dolev tells us, “we leave the pointlike present behind as well” (128). The root of the problem is supposed to be that ‘present’ and ‘now’ are context dependent and always refer to extended time periods. As an example, consider the following true sentence:

I used to go to the pub every weekend, but *now* I don’t do this any more.

Since nobody can go to the pub every weekend at a single instant, the ‘now’ in this sentence clearly does not refer to an extensionless time point, but to a period of at least a few weeks’ duration. In other cases of a similar structure, ‘now’ may refer to a few centuries, or a few seconds. Dolev concludes from this context dependence that “we do not know what sense to attach to talk of ‘the present’s duration’ ” (122).

In some sense, this is surely right, but I am not sure it is a very interesting one. The argument has a similar flavor as that in chapter 4. We are told that, if only we pay close attention to the meaning of our words, we realize that we do not know what our metaphysical theses mean. But in this case it is easy to construct a *theoretical* notion of ‘now’ that serves our purposes. Let us grant that it depends on the context whether or not an extended event counts as “wholly present.” Then it is still true that any two present events overlap, and that they do so even if their presentness is evaluated with respect to *different* contexts. Nothing prevents us from giving the new technical name ‘the present proper’ to the point where all these context-dependent nows overlap. For example, we could follow Bertrand Russell and take times to be maximal classes of pairwise overlapping events,⁶ or we could treat them as intersections of maximal classes of overlapping events (if our mereology of events permits this). Whether either method would yield a very plausible account of time is of course a different question, but the context dependence of our ordinary notions of ‘now’ and ‘present’ alone does not seem to prevent us from giving a coherent formulation of a view of time as composed of extensionless instants.

⁶ “On Order in Time,” *Proceedings of the Cambridge Philosophical Society* 32 (1936): 216–228.

Post-Ontological Philosophy of Time

In the remainder of chapter 5, Dolev makes distinctions he did not make before, by carefully separating the different facets of the tensed/tenseless debate. As a result, there is more material in these sections than I could hope to cover here, so let me briefly focus on one representative section, the discussion of the “presence of experience” in 5.2. There, Dolev defends a thesis that appears to be at variance with the earlier parts of his book:

There is something distinctly strange about the thought that the pastness of remembered experiences, or the futurity of anticipated experiences, are phenomena in need of an explanation [...] Noting this can help awaken us to the peculiarity of accounting for the so-called presence of experience. Indeed, we will now proceed to see that the “presence of experience,” the “pastness of the remembered,” and the “futurity of the anticipated” are ghosts of phenomena—there are no such things and nothing to account for. (132)

One would expect this to lead to a dismissal of tensed theories of time, whose *raison d'être* it is to account for things like the “presence of experience.” In fact, the opposite happens. The person who bears the brunt of the criticism in section 5.2 is D. H. Mellor, who defends a tenseless theory of time.⁷ In section 2.5, Dolev complains that the friends of tenseless theories do not have a good account of the “presence of experience.” Yet when they try to give such an account section 5.2 accuses them of trying to solve a mere pseudo-problem! Surely, if there is no such thing as the “presence of experience” then that is a problem for *tensed* theories. Similar remarks apply to sections 5.3–5.6, where Dolev sets out to show that other aspects of the tensed/tenseless debate (such as the flow of time) are concerned with mere pseudo-issues as well. All of these are “phenomena” that the friends of tensed theories wanted us to account for, and I do not see any reason why the advocates of *tenseless* theories should accept any of the blame. I would be happy to accept Dolev’s conclusion in chapter 5 that much of the tensed/tenseless debate is concerned with mere pseudo-issues; what I do not quite see is how he can hold this view without undermining the earlier parts of his argument. He claims that we can only get to the enlightened state of chapter 5 if we first wrestle with the tensed/tenseless debate, and then overcome it by means of

⁷ Dolev’s official position is that the tensed and tenseless theories of time are equally misguided, but it is hard to resist the impression that his sympathies lie with the former.

the exercise of chapter 4. But the main arguments of chapter 5 build on the context dependence of ‘now’ noted in 5.1 and they seem to be independent of the argument in chapter 4. Nothing prevents us from applying the insights from chapter 5 directly to the discussion in chapters 1–3. While this would indeed reveal much of the tensed/tenseless debate to be pointless, this would all be the fault of the advocates of tensed theories. Since they are the ones who want us to solve mere pseudo-problems, the debate would be resolved in favor of tenseless theories.

Ulrich Meyer

Colgate University