

Leif Frenzel
GIVING THE PRESENT MORE ROOM

It is widely believed that the present (if something genuine is thought to be falling under that concept at all) must be durationless, an instant without temporal extension. Many philosophers, both historical and contemporary, have taken this as obvious; if there is argument at all in favour of it, then it has most often been inspired by a prominent and seldom questioned standard argument.¹

The *locus classicus* of the argument is in the XI. book of St. Augustine's *Confessions*.² Augustine examines intervals that could be said to be present and observes that every one of them (a hundred years, one year, a month and so on) can be divided into parts, of which only one is present, all others being already past or yet to come. And that present part itself can be divided further and further. There is nothing that deserves to be called present if it can be divided into parts, for most of those parts would be past or future, and this means that the interval as a whole cannot be present:

If we can think of some bit of time which cannot be divided into even the smallest instantaneous moments, that alone is what we can call 'present'. And this time flies so quickly from future into past that it is an interval with no duration.³

Within that line of thought two sub-arguments can be distinguished. The first of them runs as follows: The present must be thought of as extensionless, that is: a durationless instant or, alternatively, an infinitely thin border between something else (the past and the future). For it can be demonstrated that no temporal interval, that is, no extended span of time, can be present, and this means that the present must be something else, there being no other plausible candidates than just that conception of an instant or a border. The second sub-argument is the one that demonstrates that no interval can be present.

In this essay I shall argue that the latter fails, and therefore an interval *can* be present. However, a defender of the standard argument would not

¹It has been questioned by John Findlay: "Time: a treatment of some puzzles", *Australasian Journal of Psychology and Philosophy*, XIX (1941), pp. 216-235. While I am in agreement with Findlay's criticism of the reasoning exemplified by the standard argument, I do not share his general approach to the problems under discussion.

²St. Augustine, *Confessions*, XI.19-20, Oxford 1991, pp. 231-233.

³Ibd., p. 232.

have to stick with the particular line of reasoning in the argument cited above. Any argument that establishes the intended conclusion would serve the same purpose. It will be necessary, then, to see whether reasons other than those given in the standard argument would support the claim that an interval cannot be present. There is one candidate in particular, which has usually been formulated as directed against the doctrine of the so-called 'specious present'. I shall extract from this what I take as the metaphysical core of most arguments directed against a conception of an extended present, and argue that this is based on the same incoherent reasoning as the standard argument. I conclude with some remarks about the first sub-argument.

I

What are the reasons for thinking that no interval, that is, no stretch of time, nothing with a temporal extension, can be present?

The standard argument takes the form of a *reductio ad absurdum*, and builds on two crucial premises. The proposition to reduce is

P) An interval (extended stretch of time) can be present.

Now every interval can be divided into parts. The parts of an interval are again intervals (we don't need to introduce *moments* as parts of intervals here), and I shall assume that all parts of an interval are disjoint (the intervals that form the parts do not overlap) and are proper parts (that is, we do not consider the special case in which there is only one part which is identical with the interval of which it is a part).

Of all parts of a given interval, then, there will be exactly one which is present, as opposed to all other parts. In the formulation of the argument that is given by Augustine, this is introduced by example: within the present year, when divided into months, there will be exactly one of them which is the present month; if the month is divided further into days, then there will be a single day which is today, the present day, all other days being either past or future, and so on. In general, let us say that

- 1) On every partitioning of a temporal interval, which is present if viewed as a whole, there is exactly one of its parts that is present, all other parts being either past or future.

From the examples given, this has indeed a certain plausibility. It will be of some importance, however, to inquire into the grounds for holding that

premise. Just in order to have a label at hand, I shall henceforth refer to it as the principle of the singularity of the present part.

The standard argument proceeds then to its second premise: Since all but one of the sub-intervals are past or future, but not present, the interval is composed almost entirely of parts that are not present. At least there will be always a number of non-present parts in it. This is taken to indicate that the interval as a whole cannot be seen as present:

- 2) An interval cannot be present if some of its parts are not present. If something can be called present at all, then it would be its present part.

Let us call this the privilegedness of a sub-interval over the interval as a whole, with respect to its presentness.

Two distinct thoughts are contained in this: First, it can be seen as an extension of the principle of the singularity of the present part in that there is, even within the set that contains all parts and the whole, exactly one temporal item that can be present; and it entails, secondly, that this singled-out present interval would always be the present part, and never the whole interval.

Given these principles it would be justified to conclude that no interval can be present. For let A be some interval that is assumed to be present. With 1) it follows that A can be divided, all of the resulting parts but one being not present, and together with 2) this implies that A is not present. Since this is a contradiction, the proposition P) must be rejected.

Thus the argument proceeds by first deriving an attribution of presentness to one (and only one) of the parts of a present interval, and then denying, for the very reason that *only* that part can be properly called present, the presentness of the interval, seen as a whole.

II

Although it seems plausible at first sight, there is something obscure about the principle of the singularity of the present part. Since it is supposed to be a generalization over the examples given, it gains some of its plausibility from them. But there is no hint, in the formulation of 1) above, as to what exactly is the ground on which the generalization rests. The examples suggest something slightly stronger than that formulation: it is not just that there is always exactly one present sub-interval. It is a *particular* sub-interval which

is present. To say only that there must be a sub-interval among the parts of an interval such that all others are either earlier or later is not enough, for this could be said equally of any one of them.

Take the example of the present year again. It is not only that exactly one of the months is different from all others in being the present month. It could not be any month. It is a *particular* month that is the present month, and it seems that whatever the reasons are for that particular month's being the present one, they also account for its being the only one that is present. There is something special about the present sub-interval that makes it a *present* sub-interval, and that, whatever it is, is what makes it singular, and therefore makes it *the* present sub-interval.

The standard argument seems not to depend on this, but is content with the more abstract form I have given above as 1). Of course that could simply be an economy of means. Everything that is needed has been included, the rest is considered as irrelevant. If that were so, it would be redundant, but quite unproblematic, to make those irrelevant aspects explicit. But I suspect that this is not quite the whole story. As I shall try to show, there is indeed an incoherence in the picture that comes into view only if all relevant aspects are made explicit.

Let us take a little closer look at the principle of the singularity of the present part. To say that there is exactly one present sub-interval of a present interval means, first, that there is *at least* one such present sub-interval, and secondly, that there is *at most* one. What is the justification behind those claims?

The latter is usually defended by pointing out that the sub-intervals of an interval are ordered with respect to the earlier-than relation. It is plain that the parts of an interval must stand either in the relation 'earlier than' or in the relation 'later than' to each other. But in neither case they could be both present. Of any two parts of an interval at most one can therefore be present, and from this it follows that no partitioning of an interval can contain more than one present part.

As is well known, there are two possible ways to characterize events in temporal respect: using either the concepts of present, past and future or the relation terms 'earlier-than' and 'later-than'. Following McTaggart (as usual) I will refer to the concepts of the former kind as A-concepts and to those of the latter kind as B-concepts.

Now it is not clear, since the concept of the present belongs to the A-vocabulary, exactly why an evasive maneuver into the application of B-concepts should be thus informative about the presentness or otherwise of temporal items. As I shall argue later (see IV and V below), this should indeed be seen with suspicion. Although there is a connection between the

application of A- and B-terms, it may not be as strong as is usually supposed. Nothing seems to depend on it here, however; let us then accept it for the sake of argument.

The other claim is the more important one. The argument requires that an interval may not be viewed as present as a whole, but that it is always possible to say of some sub-interval that it is more properly said to be present than the interval which is thus partitioned. It is essential to identify that one sub-interval and to claim that it is only this which can be called 'present'. So we must find out how it follows, from the premise that the interval as a whole is present, that there is a sub-interval of the present interval that is present, as opposed to all other sub-intervals.

III

We could assume that an interval is called 'present' if it contains the present moment, the moment that is *now*. This is, although it presumably could be brought to work as a justification for 1), not a good move to take for the defender of the standard argument, for the whole interval contains that moment as well. If it is the containing of the present moment which makes an interval present, how could we proceed to 2), the principle that only the single present part of the interval is what could be properly called present, excluding the containing interval as well as the other parts?

There should be something about the sub-interval in question that qualifies it as present over the interval as a whole. But so far it has been stipulated nothing more than that the sub-interval is a proper part of the whole interval. From this it follows that it must be shorter in extension, but it would be implausible and arbitrary to state that of two intervals which both contain the present moment the more narrow one is therefore more present.

In addition, it is not clear why we should accept the present moment as present-maker - would this not mean to assume what the argument aims at? It would at least mean to assign to the extensionless present, the very thing that has to be demonstrated, a fundamental role which cannot be justified by the standard argument, on pain of circularity.

It might be argued that an interval is said to be present only if there is a point of view (or perspective) from which it is present. Something is present only *for* someone. Thus there is, if we are to speak of something as present, a temporal context that must be taken into account. From within that context it would inevitably be the case that one of the parts of the interval would be present, while all others, being earlier or later, would not. This is because the

interval and its present part must be seen as constituting nested contexts, with the focal point located within both.

Take the present year as an example: If it is the present year, then we must be within that year. Whatever experience we connect with the presentness of it (e.g. that this year's winter is hard), it is seen as the context surrounding that experience. When dividing it into days, there will be, among all 365 (or possibly 366) days that are the result of the partitioning, exactly one day that is today, the present day. It is not possible to divide the present year into days and to leave out the present day, for the present year *must* contain it, or otherwise it would not be the present year. And the idea is that it contains it because the present day is equally a context of the experience.

The same would apply if we took our departure not from some subject's point of view but rather from the utterance of some sentence in the present tense. If the sentence contains token-reflexive expressions (like 'this year', 'today' etc), the temporal context would be determined via the time of the utterance of the sentence.

Whether we see the temporal context as constituted by the experience of a conscious subject or the utterance of a sentence containing token-reflexive temporal expressions, we will be forced to admit that there must be one of the parts of the interval that wraps around the context of the subject or speaker, while all other intervals are extern to it.

This does at least avoid the charge of assuming that presentness grounds in an extensionless moment, which is what the argument has to show in the first place. It could even be argued that, as for an experiencing subject or for a speaker who communicates by means of temporally token-reflexive terms the events with a shorter temporal distance will usually be more important and intense, a more narrow interval as the subject's or speaker's context has a certain priority over a more extended one; therefore the present sub-interval would arguably be a better candidate for the attribution of presentness to it than the whole interval. So this seems a rather promising path for the defender of the standard argument.

But is it indeed plausible to claim that it would be always the more narrow context that has priority in respect of presentness? Some experiences, although constituted by different parts of a process, may primarily be tied to the whole interval rather than to its parts.

What I have in mind here are examples of the following sort: when listening to a melody, we perceive more than just a succession of sounds. It would not be wrong if we said we were presently listening to that melody, even if we were in the midst of that process and what we heard would be only a single sound at a time (not even if we heard the melody for the first time). What constitutes the experience of the melody is more than just the

experience of that sound alone, and that experience of the melody is primary to discerning the single sounds. As another example, consider some situation in which we have a rather annoying experience, like hearing the sounds of dripping water. What constitutes the annoying experience here is the process of perceiving them again and again. And this is certainly more intense and important than the one single dripping heard in the respective present part of the interval that spans the whole process.

In both cases it is at least questionable whether it is indeed the part which is more properly called present rather than the whole. So the main problem for a defender of the standard argument remains: it is still doubtful that the present part should be treated as prior to the whole interval with respect to its presentness.

One alternative formulation of 2) employs the notion of simultaneity: on that formulation, we would demand of two intervals, if they are to be called both present, that they be simultaneous. This is a very short way indeed: since we have stipulated that the parts we refer to are proper parts (i.e. disjoint sub-intervals) of the interval, it is plain that the whole interval and one of its parts cannot be simultaneous. So it would be impossible already by definition that an interval and one of its part could be both present.

But this is an artificial sense of 'present', and it is not clear why we should accept such a definition, which binds the term to a comparison of two intervals and is not obviously connected to the term as applied to a single interval (as it is used in all argument before). It would take away much of the intelligibility of 1) if we attempted to formulate it with an understanding of something as present like that. And even if we did accept, still it would not be clear why it is the part, and not the enclosing interval, that is favoured in regarding it present over the other.

We have seen that whatever assumption we make as to what the singularity of the present part grounds in, it undermines the possibility of taking step 2), the claim that the supposedly present interval is outweighed by its present part. It can be thought of several good reasons that could support a claim like 1), but this would be only half the way - for they would have to be brought into coherence with 2). As I have argued, they cannot. Conversely, if we tried to justify 2) independently of 1) via the notion of simultaneity, there would be an incompatibility problem as well.

I suspect that a good deal of the appeal of the standard argument rests on this not making explicit what justifies the principle of the singularity of the present part, on pain of destroying plausibility for the privilege of the present part, or *vice versa*.

IV

It is claimed in the standard argument that not both a present interval and its present part can be present. The examples given in its formulation suggest that it must be the present part, rather than the interval as a whole, which is privileged in that respect (this is what principle 2) above states), whereas the examples I provided in the last section were meant to show that it may be the other way round as well. We should go one step farther now and ask whether the impression is not deceptive at all.

There is not, contrary to what is claimed in the argument, a problem with *both* the interval as a whole *and* one of its parts being present. To see this, consider another example: imagine that someone denies that the football team of Brasilia is presently world champion, not for some difficult judicial reasons, but on account of the following argument: at the moment there are qualifying matches for the next World Cup, and since the period of qualification games is a part of the period the winner of the last championship is regarded as the world champion, the former is a part of the latter. Being the present part it is, according to the standard argument, more properly called present as well, and therefore Brasilia's being champion cannot be present. (In continuation of his considerations he would probably deny the presentness of the qualifiers as well.)

This is of course absurd (although it is a straightforward application of the reasoning in the standard argument), and the problem lies precisely in the application of the principle of the privileged present part to the intervals in question (the period of the winner of the last championship's being champion and the period of qualification matches), which seemed plausible in the examples given in the standard argument (the present year and the the present month, for instance).

What is different here is the way the intervals are determined. What we regard as present is usually either some state of affairs or some still lasting process. With this corresponds the way we describe something present: by use of the present tense. Using that linguistic means we express that such-and-such is the case, or we refer to something going on, that such-and-such is taking place. In everyday life there is no state that does not obtain some span of time at least, and there could be no process of which we would not discern different stages; whatever we refer to as present is therefore the content of a stretch of time. We determine the begin and ending of that stretch by reference to some change in the world (which made the present state initially hold or marked the starting of the present process). Since both the reference

to the present state or process itself and to its start and end are tied to a context, there is a high context-sensitivity in play here.

In the formulation of the standard argument, on the other hand, the intervals in question are not determined with reference to changes in the world. Instead, they are abstract time intervals like a year, a month etc., which are used to sort events into a common coordinate system.

But our notion of the present does not stem from such abstract intervals. In order to decide whether some state is presently holding, or some process is lasting, we do not normally (and, in fact cannot) rely on locating them in the temporal coordinate system; we must decide this by taking into account other events, states and processes in the world. A purely formal characterization of them as earlier or later than each other is not enough to classify them as present or otherwise.

The standard argument is formulated by using exclusively the abstract way of determining the intervals in question. But this excludes precisely what makes, in a common understanding, an interval present. From a view that employs preferred formal B-terminology, this is what is abstracted from. In short: the formulation of the standard argument *assumes*, at the very beginning, the presentness of an interval, but proceeds by using conceptual means which are by their very structure incapable of bringing into view what *makes* them present.

This reflects a tendency I already mentioned: since the concepts of present, past and future depend much more on material references (to changes in the world), the A-concepts are a good deal less formal than the B-concepts, which are formed in abstraction from such references. Nevertheless it is tried to give an account of the present from within a conceptual framework which ignores this and builds solely on lines of argument formulated with B-concepts. It is this systematic neglect of the grounds for regarding an interval as present that makes the standard argument incoherent.

V

So far I have argued that the standard argument against the presentness of an interval fails because of an internal incoherence. Let us see whether it can be substituted by a different argument that establishes the same conclusion.

The particular argument I have in view as a candidate is directed against a view of the present as extended which is known as the doctrine of the 'specious present'. That term denotes whatever interval is seen as the time-interval that is experienced as present by a conscious subject. It has been

stated more than once that this experience must be an illusion, if the real present has to be thought of as extensionless. Whatever is extended in a present interval, then, cannot be but merely subjective. This is shown again by a *reductio ad absurdum* argument:⁴

Since the extension of the experienced present varies from individual to individual (and from occasion to occasion), there may well be, in a certain situation, some event experienced as present by one person, which is not at all experienced as present by another person. If the real present would be identified with the experienced present, this would mean something's being equally present and not present. Therefore, it is concluded, can the real present, if indeed there is one at all, not be identified with the experienced present, which is rather a 'specious' present.

There may or may not be an advantage in endorsing the doctrine of the specious present for a proponent of an extended present. But I think that a metaphysical view should not rest on psychological arguments alone. If there is no ground for such a view in metaphysical considerations, and if no argument can be supplied from within metaphysics, it would not be likely to be respectable view at all. I leave out a discussion of that doctrine here. If it can be successfully defended, it will probably add to the plausibility of a view of an extended present; if not, this would not necessarily cause any serious problems for such a view, as long as it rests on independent and genuine metaphysical argument as well.

Now, while I do not intend to discuss the doctrine of the specious present here, a similar argument may be construed that focuses on context-sensitivity in general, rather than on the relativity of what is experienced. An argument thus generalized may serve as a substitute for the standard reasoning discussed above.

It would run like this: suppose some interval were present as seen from some context, and some other interval, which partly overlaps the first one, as present from some other context. This would mean that there is some event which is contained in the second interval, and therefore must be seen as present, while it is not contained in the first interval, and therefore not present. More precisely, there is a moment in the second interval which is simultaneous with the occurring of the event in question, and there is some moment that is not simultaneous with, but either earlier or later than, any moment in the first interval. This means that the event must be seen as both present and not present, and this is impossible.

The problem with this argument is, again, that it employs an inference

⁴See e.g. John M.E. McTaggart, "The Unreality of Time", *Mind*, 68 (1908), pp. 457-474, esp. pp. 471-472.

which depends crucially on the higher degree of abstractness in the B-concepts. It involves a transition from a singled-out event, which is classified from within a context as present, to a classification of that event within a coordinate system which exactly abstracts from whatever made it present in that context, and back to a context that allows to view it as otherwise than present. But the latter context is not just another one, but a different one in the very respect relevant for classifying events as present or otherwise. What is different between the contexts is what counts as present within them, and it is this difference which is neglected by the questionable transition.

A proponent of a view of the present as extended should maintain that there is no inconsistency in viewing an interval as present while at the same time discerning earlier and later parts of it. We have different ways to refer to intervals: one of them is by mentioning explicitly some date in the common time coordinate system, another is by reference to a state of affairs (of which we indicate, in using the present tense, that it obtains now, and we do assume, under ordinary circumstances, that it already lasts some time and will presumably last a while longer) or a process which is going on (implying, again, that it already has been and will be lasting some more time). The latter way depends on material references to something that goes on in the world, not on locating the present moment in an ordering of abstract moments. There is of course nothing wrong with locating it thus; the point is that it is neither necessary nor is in fact what we usually do when classifying something as present.

Think of the football example again. What we refer to, in saying that a certain team is world champion, is a state which is described by using knowledge about the world, and it is clear from the context that what is meant here is not an instantaneous state, but a state that lasts already some time, and will last some further time. So there is an interval (of roughly four years) within which that state holds, and no inconsistency occurs suddenly when we start to speak about other events and processes which may be contained in that interval, that is, simultaneous with events which have temporal coordinates accordingly.

If I am right, then the incoherence here is of the same kind as the one found in the standard argument. In effect, the defender of the argument challenges the proponent of the theory of an extended present to show how there can be an interval whose parts are all simultaneous with each other. This is impossible; the question is whether the challenge is valid. For it presupposes the view that is held by the defender of the argument, namely that to be present is to be simultaneous with the present moment, the 'now', and therefore that anything present is simultaneous with anything else, as long as it is present as well. This, however, is question-begging, and the

proponent of the theory of an extended present is right to reject it. Of course there is no interval whose parts are all simultaneous with each other, but no requirement for such a thing would follow from regarding an interval as present. Indeed there are, in a present interval, parts which are earlier or later than other parts of it. But this doesn't make its presentness problematic at all.

Take, as an example, my sitting at the desk and writing this essay today. There are parts of the interval that spans this process which are earlier (and there are some that will be later) than the present moment, i.e. which are earlier (or later) than now. As long as we regard them exclusively as parts of that interval, they are all parts of something that is present. We may single out, by means of a temporal reference that is external to this process (e.g. by reference to that helicopter loudly passing by ten minutes ago, or simply the last complete hour), a part of the process, and regard it as a past moment. But this depends on such an external reference, and this means already contrasting the present with something determined as past independently. It does not follow from the holding of the earlier-than relation between the parts (i.e. the part that is 'now' and the part that was somewhat later) of the present interval in question.

In other words: present states or processes do not *change* (as long as they are not contrasted with states or processes external to them) with respect to their presentness, and therefore no alteration of present, past or future takes place within them. My writing this essay is a process, and the interval that spans that process is present. And there is no change in this regard - which moment of this process ever I could refer to, it would be the case that my writing this essay is present, for it would be that very same process, and it would be invariably present.

Although there are different parts (and different moments) within this process, and although they do stand in temporal relations with each other, whatever difference in their content may be, it makes no difference to the interval's being present (if it would they would not be parts of that interval). And even though there is a present moment that has a permanently changing content, as long as the interval is present, those changes in its content make no difference to its presentness. To suppose that the presentness of an interval could be affected just by singling out one of its parts and claim it to be past or future would be to take the incoherent step on which the standard argument rests.

VI

Where does all this leave the standard argument for the view that the present must be an extensionless moment? In this essay I have argued against the part of that argument which is intended to show that an interval cannot be present. I would like to comment briefly on the other sub-argument I mentioned at the beginning.

In asking the question whether the present is extended or extensionless, it is already assumed that there must be essentially one single temporal object which is denoted by that term. In short, that the present is extensionless is inferred from both the supposed impossibility of an interval being present and the premise that it must be either an interval or an extensionless moment. But the present is neither. What we mean with that term is not a single temporal object, approached preferredly in B-terminology, although it is composed of (or describable with reference to) such items.

It makes a difference whether we say that *the* present is an interval or that there are intervals that are present. In fact, there may be many overlapping intervals which may be seen as present, and if there is a coherent use of a concept of 'the' present at all, it would have to comprehend them all (and it would not simply be enough to declare it as the interval between the earliest start and the latest end of one of the present intervals which make it up). How 'the present' is to conceive then in relation to those intervals is a question that goes at least one step further as is suggested in the formulation of the standard argument.

It would be one thing to say that the present has *always* (say) the duration of a second (that it is a rigid stretch of time with the length of one second moving from future to past), and something else to say that there are present intervals, which vary in duration and are *sometimes* a second long, but can be longer or shorter, depending on context. It is a strong requirement of a view of the present which conceives it as extended that it names a fixed interval which denotes always the extension of the present. Once in place (and admitting that of course no such fixed interval can be named), it leaves as the only remaining candidates for the present the infinite stretch of time (extending infinitely into both temporal directions from 'now'), which would make everything present, and the extensionless instant that is 'now', which leaves practically nothing as present if it is not without temporal extension as well. Instead of leading us to think that the notion of the present may be incoherent or to adopt a view as strange as that of the present as an extensionless moment, this should rather make us suspicious of the validity of the requirement.

There is no problem, of course, in the notion of an extensionless moment;

what I am arguing against is the identification of the present, first with some temporal item (which would be an interval or moment) and then, forced by some reasoning along the lines of the standard argument, with such an extensionless moment. I have argued that this is unsound, and it is far from being in accordance with common modes of speaking (where it would be absurd to entertain a theory of the present as extensionless; it would plainly contradict the way we use words - and tenses).