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The Disappearance of Time: Kurt Godel and the Idealistic Tradition in Philosophy. by Palle Yourgrau

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BOOK REVIEWS

the a posteriori probability of h conditioned on the result O will be greater than h 's a priori probability. It would seem, then, that Achinstein's defense of independent warrant as the main means of probability accrual to a hypothesis does not succeed. Nonetheless the essays do give an intriguing and valuable reconstruction of the role of independent warrant in the history of science over the last several centuries.

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THE DISAPPEARANCE OF TIME: KURT GÖDEL AND THE IDEALISTIC TRADITION IN PHILOSOPHY. By PALLE YOURGRAU. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991. Pp. x, 182.

The central aim of this book is to explicate and defend Gödel's view that time is "unreal." It is a sophisticated work with frequent flashes of insight into one of the most difficult areas of philosophy.

In general, Yourgrau writes with care and rigor. Occasionally, however, he makes brief pronouncements without elaboration or supporting argument. For example, we are told that Gödel was driven to his radical position by the seemingly insurmountable difficulties in maintaining the notion of temporal transience or "time's passage." There is, however, little elucidation of the nature of these difficulties. When he first refers to them, this is all we are told:

Clearly, the notion of *nunc fluens*, to be made sense at all, must be regarded as primitive, as *sui generis*. Time may be in some sense *like* a river but it is just where the analogy falters that intuitive insight must step in (if it can) to complete the picture. (29)

It is a plausible conjecture that the reason why the moving present may not make sense to Yourgrau is what many philosophers have told us before: one can talk about movement in space which refers to a changing position in space corresponding to changing position in time. However, the flow of the river of time cannot be conceived of at all unless we introduce a second-order time against which the flow can be measured. But is it not too quick to dismiss the deeply entrenched notion of passage in this manner? After all, we can speak of the variation in the pressure of a gas without reference to time by relating it to a variation in the magnitude of temperature, that is, we can say that as temperature changes from θ_1 to θ_2 , pressure moves from p_1 to p_2 . Thus, it should be at least worth asking

oneself whether we cannot talk about changes in the reality of the terms in the B-series of moments corresponding to changes in some other cosmic variable, for example, the scaling factor, or the radius of the universe. In this way when the cosmic variable moves from s_1 to s_2 , the position of the “now” shifts from t_1 to t_2 .

Later on, Yourgrau mentions that in

relativity theory . . . as Gödel reads it, there is no objective correlate of the subjective experience of the passing of time. (38)

This is puzzling, since relativity theory is in no way unique in its avoidance of reference to the transient aspect of time. Indeed we may open at random any textbook in classical mechanics, geometrical optics, acoustics and so on, and find not a single (tensed) A-statement, except in the preface where the author says, “I wish to thank my wife for her past forbearance and hope that in the future . . .”

At the same time, Yourgrau is most succinct and entirely effective in defending Prior’s support of transientism in his famous ‘Thank Goodness it is Over’ (126–27). Prior’s argument was that a severe headache is absent before it has begun no less than after it has abated, yet it seems appropriate to issue expressions of relief only after it has passed and not before its onset. Surely, the correct account of this is that we are pleased that the agony is over, that it is receding into the past instead of looming ahead and menacingly approaching us.

Mellor attempted to reject this argument by claiming it to be a law of nature (and not subject to questioning or explaining) that a feeling of relief occurs invariably after and not before a period of pain. Yourgrau’s reply to Mellor is convincing. To paraphrase it: We might as well end all discussions of why people tend to put on heavy overcoats when it is cold by saying that they are required to do so by a law of nature. Surely it is far more illuminating to explain the phenomenon by reference to the human body’s need of warmth and a heavy coat’s capacity to preserve it.

Lately, possible worlds have often been introduced in temporal discussions. Yourgrau follows this practice in arguing that just as (according to Lewis) all worlds are equally actual relative to themselves and thus no single possible world is, objectively speaking, privileged, so all moments of time are present relative to themselves and, hence, none is to be singled out as privileged (and present). There seem to be at least two errors in this argument. First, we cannot say that the statement ‘All possible worlds are actual relative to themselves’ has substance before it has been established that worlds beside ours have themselves any substance. Secondly, as already indicated, all points in time are not equally privileged since t_1

may be privileged only at s_1 , while the privilege of t_2 is confined to s_2 . Nothing corresponding to this can be claimed with respect to worlds.

Most of Yourgrau's book is about issues surrounding its central thesis that time is an illusion, rather than a detailed exposition of the significance of that thesis. This is not a defect of his work. After all, Gödel has been preceded by McTaggart in enunciating the view that the dynamic aspects of time are incoherent, while the static aspects on their own are insufficient to produce a satisfactory notion of time. In the following ninety-five years dozens of essays have been published to explicate, analyze, expand, defend, or denounce McTaggart's reasoning. Very few words have been written to explain what the thesis implied by the argument might amount to. (Given, for instance, that everything physical must occupy some point in time, does it follow that nothing physical really exists?) Rather than engage in such speculations, risking the loss of their intellectual grip on reality, philosophers have tried to tackle the argument for the unreality of time, which, they assume, lends itself to the commonly acknowledged tools of logical reasoning.

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UNNATURAL DOUBTS: EPISTEMOLOGICAL REALISM AND THE BASIS OF SCEPTICISM. By MICHAEL WILLIAMS. New York: Blackwell, 1991. Pp. xxiii, 386.

"To hold that sceptical doubts are natural is to deny that the sceptic depends essentially on distinctive theoretical commitments not clearly implicit in our ordinary handling of epistemic concepts." Against those who so hold, Williams is out to show that "sceptical arguments depend essentially on theoretical commitments that are *not* forced on us by our ordinary ways of thinking about knowledge, justification, and truth" (31–32). In fact, it turns out that *one* such commitment drives the various apparently compelling skeptical arguments: *epistemological foundationalism*, the view that "our knowledge of the external world . . . need[s] to be derived, in some general way, from prior experiential data" (56). By showing this dependence, Williams hopes neither definitively to refute skepticism nor to show the skeptic's doubts to be incoherent, but only to show that the skeptical arguments are *not compelling*.

Strangely, the whole first chapter discusses the issue of how natural, intuitive, and compelling skeptical arguments are in the abstract, without any presentation of the arguments being discussed. And in later chapters,