

The Reality of the Temporal

Author(s): Josiah Royce

Source: *International Journal of Ethics*, Vol. 20, No. 3 (Apr., 1910), pp. 257-271

Published by: The University of Chicago Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2376485>

Accessed: 09-09-2018 16:52 UTC

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

The University of Chicago Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *International Journal of Ethics*

THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ETHICS

APRIL, 1910.

THE REALITY OF THE TEMPORAL.*

JOSIAH ROYCE.

THERE remains somewhat vaguely and obscurely in my own memory a brief fragment of a story which I read in my childhood. I cannot recall the context of this fragment. I do not know who was the author of the story. I cannot tell why just this incident remains alone in my mind, while the rest of the tale is forgotten. But this was the chance bit that I recall: A bold bad elder boy tempted the too trustful little boy who was the hero of the story, to disobey the express commands of the hero's parents, or perhaps of his teachers, and to play truant in company with the elder boy. The enticement used by the tempter was substantially as follows: "Come with me into town, and I will show you something that nobody ever saw before, and that nobody will ever see again." The trustful hero wondered, and yielded, and went. But when once the expedition had started, the somewhat insolent leader, absorbed in his own affairs, and content with keeping his follower under his control, long delayed the expected exhibition of the promised marvel. The little boy grew impatient. He had a variety of experiences, indeed; but nothing seemed to him to fulfill his expectations. At length the triumphant seducer paused at a shop, bought some nuts, and, cracking one of them,

* A paper read before the American Philosophical Association, New Haven, December 29, 1909.

held up the kernel and said: "Did anybody ever see that before?" The hero was obliged to respond, "No." Thereupon the bad boy, instead of offering this nut or any other of the nuts to his comrade, cruelly ate the kernel and said: "Will anybody ever see that again?" and the small boy sorrowfully answered with another "No," and returned through tribulations to the paths of virtue.

Perhaps it was the dialectical interest of the bad boy's unfeeling paradox that arrested my own comparatively innocent imagination, although I was a very small boy when I myself read the story. This paradox lay in the obvious fact that the tempter in this tale had in a way inverted what you and I now know as the logical position assumed by Epimenides the Cretan. Whatever the small boy's disappointment, namely, the tempter had been true to his own word. If the tempter had primarily deceived, he had secondarily told the truth. For if indeed he had not shown the notable wonder in the external world that his innocent dupe had been led to expect, he had taught the small boy a genuinely novel lesson in the danger of hasty anticipations and of over-confidence in deceivers. This teaching itself was a showing of something. This something was of deep importance to the younger boy. As they say, it was valuable experience. And since, for every individual, such lessons have indeed their unique personal rank in his own life, one could say that just this sad disillusionment had never occurred to anybody before. "*Es ist eine alte Geschichte, doch bleibt sie immer neu.*" Such is a fair comment whenever the seductive expectation finds its victim, whether in love or in finance or in the history of exploration,—whether amongst us older people or amongst the small boys.

The lessons of my story seem indeed manifold. I am a little reminded of this tale, for instance, when I hear that there is nowadays a form of the New Realism which has obtained a very novel insight into the nature of Time, and when I later discover that the new theory is that the time world is one wherein novel events are always occur-

ring,—events that nobody ever saw before, and that nobody will ever see again. I watch such theories crack their nuts and produce the kernel, and then I sometimes wish that I were not so far from the home of sound reason as some of them want me to wander. To be sure, they have told me the truth, but in how disappointingly familiar and commonplace a fashion.

Let me say, however, at once that as to the main facts insisted upon in the most notable recent discussions of the time problem, I am in thorough agreement with the authors of these discussions. Our common philosophical interest lies in the interpretation of these facts. And so let me summarize at this point what I suppose to be the points in which I agree with most of you regarding the time problem. Let me thereafter, however, suggest why, like the little boy, I am sometimes disappointed with the interpretations of the nature of temporal novelty which I find in recent literature.

In time, reality passes through a series of changes which constitute the history of the world. These changes are exemplified in each one of us by the sequences of the events of his own personal experience. That change occurs, and really occurs, is therefore verifiable for each one of us at every moment. We have learned, however, to regard the conception of real change, or of real process, as a conception applicable to reality over a field infinitely more extended than is the range of the changes that we can personally verify. The physical and the mental realms are alike conceived by us in terms of the concept of real process. Whatever now is, is either itself undergoing change, or is taking part in processes, such as movements or activities, which involve change. If there are any permanent substances at all in the world, we still conceive that either their accidents or their relations are in some respects changing. These changes constitute the events of the time-order.

This realm of events we conceive as subject to certain notable general laws. In the first place, we conceive the

events of the real world as ordered according to two relations,—relations which are, to be sure, of the same general logical type as those familiar ordinal relations which, in any realm of facts or of conceptions, enable us to conceive the objects of our thought as an ordered system. These two relations are: (1) The unsymmetrical and transitive relation of *predecessor of* and *successor to*,—the 'earlier-later' relation; (2) the symmetrical and transitive relation of *contemporaneous with*, the relation of simultaneity. Of any two events in the real world, such events for instance as a given minimum of the variable star Algol and the occurrence of a given snowstorm in this city, or the uttering of a word, or the thinking of a thought by a given man, we say (with suitable qualifications regarding the partial incidents of which total events seem to be made up), that one of these two events occurs either *earlier than*, or *later than*, or *simultaneously* with, the other. If events that occur in different regions of the world temporally 'overlap,' we then conceive that by suitable subdivision of the events into parts, all apparent ambiguities in our decisions as to the temporal order of the events could be corrected. In this way, conceiving the real events of the world as consisting of ideally simple events, sometimes called 'instantaneous events,' we conceive that the real processes of the world form an order that one could describe as a series of chronological levels,—any level being a set of the simultaneous events of the world at any supposed and not further divided instant, while the series of these levels constitutes the history of the world in time.

That this conception of the real time-order of the universe is no immediate datum of our personal experience, but is a construct, we can all easily see. But the motives that urge upon us such a construct certainly lie deep in our nature as reasonable beings. The majestic and, upon occasion, terrible universality that we ascribe to the temporal ordering of events, is certainly due to whatever motive leads us to regard the world as in any sense real.

I do not doubt myself that in this respect we are conceiving genuine characters of the real world. So far we all go together in our account of the temporal order. But as time is conceived by the physical sciences, we all are aware that the temporal world has other characters in addition to the general ordinal ones so far defined. The series of the world's events is conceived by our physical sciences not merely as a series in general, but as a series having the special characteristics of the mathematical continuum. Its parts are viewed by these sciences as infinitely divisible; and its indivisible conceptual instants are supposed to form a series of points capable of one-one correspondence with the so-called real numbers. Now it is this conception of the time-order which Bergson views as an artificial product of certain special and more or less practical motives, and as no adequate conception of the time-order as it really is. Here again I agree. I suppose that the conceptual time of the mechanical sciences is no genuine representation of any final reality, but is an extremely useful, and within certain limits indeed verifiable artefact, suggested to us by well-known natural processes and metrical interests, illustrated by countless empirical facts, but not known to be anything more than a relatively successful hypothetical construction. I believe in this construction as an immensely useful guide, but not as a picture of absolute reality. And some sort of relative conceptual reality, verifiable for a wide range of experience, but not at all absolute, seems to me to belong to those other characters of temporal processes upon which our arts and sciences of time-measurement depend, when they define what Newton called the uniform flow of time, and use this conception to measure the laws of the duration of natural processes over against the real time-order of the world's actual history. We have thus a conceptual time-order, which is more or less fashioned after the human needs which our metrical time sciences embody. This conceptual time has a genuine and relatively but very widely verifiable relation to

the real temporal history of the world; but life, as Bergson rightly says, does not need to be conceived as merely subordinated to this artificial construction, since life has invented this conceptual construction for its own use.

The real temporal order, however, which we ascribe to the events of the universe, has still another character, which Bergson, Boodin, Lovejoy, and others all regard as very genuine. And herein, too, I agree with my colleagues. Time, they all say, contains a series of events everywhere characterized by novelty, by the constant appearance of what never has happened before, and by the passing away of each event into the irrevocable past that never can happen again. To this conceived character of the temporal order they assign a reality that Boodin and Bergson agree in regarding expressly as something very real indeed, and as something far more certainly real than is the infinitely divisible and measurable conceptual time-order of the physical sciences. Boodin emphasizes the destructive aspect of this real passing away of every item of temporal reality. Lovejoy and Bergson lay more stress upon the evolutionary, the forward-looking aspect of the case. "Novelty comes," they tell us. "Life passes to the new." "Reality constantly gains new items." "All is fleeting," insists Boodin. "Time creeps in; all fades." These thinkers agree, however, in insisting upon novelty, and upon irrevocable individual reality, as belonging to each event of the time world. And herein, too, all of these writers seem to me to be telling us the truth about the temporal order, each in his own way.

When agreement extends so far, why do I still feel, after the analogy of the little boy of my story, that these accounts are disappointing, and that the new theories of time have not shown me the real novelty that they promise.

As a fact, there is a far deeper lesson than the one which my story of the little boy has thus far brought to our notice,—a lesson which the story and the present situa-

tion in the time-controversy bring to my own mind. It is the lesson that, when one talks of novelties, and of novel individual facts, everything turns, for the interpretation of one's doctrine upon the question: Wherein does this novelty really consist? I take it that real novelty is a term which can be defined in no purely descriptive terms, but only in terms that are more or less appreciative. Herein, to be sure, I am still in some respect to agree with Bergson. What you describe is even thereby labeled with the name of the type to which it belongs. It is classified, or serialized, or leveled with other facts, or viewed as in correspondence with other facts, or is taken as the combination, or as the resultant, or as the effect of other facts. In so far, it seems to lose its uniqueness. It becomes a case of its type, a member of its collection,—a term in a serial order, a fact equal to its equals, or mated with its correspondents, or a fact consisting in its constituents, or a fact that is the outcome of the factors upon which it depends. When you thus describe it, you may of course add dogmatically that it is indeed unique, that it is different from all other facts, that it is numerically distinct from them, and so on. But you cannot and do not describe this uniqueness, this individuality. You so far merely presuppose it. Uniqueness, individuality, novelty,—these aspects of reality cannot be exhaustively described; because to describe means to treat as a particular instance of a general class, type, or form, and so tends to the ignoring of individuality.

But if uniqueness and novelty cannot be adequately described, still less can they be adequately presented to one's senses as immediate data. And herein, as I think, lies my ground for differing from Bergson. For how shall I immediately feel or see or otherwise sense the truth, if it be indeed a truth, that *this* fact of sense never was a fact for me, or for anybody else before. I can and do indeed presuppose this actual individuality, this uniqueness, and this novelty, of each and every fact of experience. That I thus presuppose uniqueness is one of

the deepest characteristics of my whole interpretation of experience. But this presupposition is not an immediate datum of sense. It is precisely an interpretation. Not one of us ever immediately observes with his senses that this is so. We all are assured, however, of a truth that is here simply supersensual. The little boy of my story ruefully admits the assertion that nobody ever saw the kernel of just that nut before. He admits, with equal assurance and disappointment that, since you cannot have your kernel and eat it too, the once eaten kernel, as that individual kernel, will never be uneaten again. But I defy anyone to point out at what moment of his life the little boy ever gets these truths presented to his senses as merely immediate data. If you say that such opinions are mere generalizations, inductively pieced together from various bits of past experience, I must reply, in a Kantian spirit that is as familiar and as rational as it is nowadays persistently ignored. And my reply is: Nobody can say, "Experience teaches me and has taught me that only when a nut is cracked does anybody first see its kernel, and that the same nut cannot twice be eaten,"—nobody can say this, I repeat, unless he first interpret his experience as a temporal sequence of unique and individual experiences,—a sequence extending back into a past which is no longer immediately given to him. This interpretation, however, simply presupposes for all facts of experience the sort of uniqueness of which the individual nut-kernel is taken to be a special instance. If everything exists only as an individual fact of experience, or as a complex, or as an interweaving or even as a continuous stream of such facts, well then of course the nut as a complex of empirical data also has its own individuality, whatever that may be. And if the special facts of experience acknowledged by the thinker who interprets his own world of experience happen to include, as one believes, the invisibility of the kernel until the nut is cracked, and the irreversibility of the physical process that occurs when the nut is eaten, then indeed the ac-

knowledge data of past experience render the little boy's admissions about the nut as probable as they are disappointing.

But these inductions from past experience, these admissions, are but special instances of what is everywhere the recognition that one has had a series of past experiences, each of which has taught its own lesson, each of which has its unique place in the whole, each of which presented an individual datum, and to view the matter thus, as we all do, is to *interpret* experience, and is not merely to accept data as they at present are immediately given. And every induction about nuts or about other facts presupposes such an interpretation of experience as an unique whole.

When one says, "This is novel," "This is unique," "This never happened before," "This is an individual thing or event or person," "I am an individual, I am unique,"—what does one mean? Does one mean simply: "This surprises me now?" "This thrills me just now?" "This interests, attracts, startles, pleases, pains, awakens me just now?" Does one mean anything that any instantaneous or immediate sense datum can now adequately present to me? No. When one asserts that such uniqueness, novelty, individuality, belongs to every person, thing, event, in the world, one interprets, and interprets most elaborately, data that can no more present to sense the truth that they are unique than the once so famous Tichborne claimant could identify himself as Roger Tichborne merely by showing his face in court.

You will observe, I hope, the relevancy of these considerations to our main problem. Some one, says Bergson, declares that time is very real. He is right. Time is just as real as it is indeed infinitely long and full of unique events. And this thinker himself adds: Time is real in so far as novelty, evolution, the occurrence of unique events, invention, life in all its wealth of individuality, are real. Again I agree with this thinker. He is right. He goes still further, and says: Hence no descrip-

tion, no reduction of time sequences to types, to classes of events, to serial orders, no explanation in terms of a world formula can ever exhaustively conceptualize the time-world, or deprive its novelties of their individual significance. Still I agree with him. But nevertheless I insist: What constitutes this novelty, this individuality, this uniqueness, of all the temporal facts as they fly past? And Bergson's answer to this question puzzles me. He seems to suppose that one can just sense this reality of the time stream, this uniqueness of each event, this individuality of each stage of the evolution of the illimitable universe. Bergson puts his sugar in the glass of water, for (to adapt Clerk Maxwell's once famous lines), "for foreigners sweeten it so." "Lo," he seems to say, "I have it, I sense it; the time world is real; for I,—even I have to wait for this individual event to take place." For the sugar, it seems, dissolves too slowly. Time "coincides with my impatience;" and, as it seems, this impatience is an incident of evolution which never happened before,— "a little invention of Bergson's own," so to speak. As Bergson's reader I grieve for our philosopher's impatience while he waits for the sugar to dissolve. I concede the novelty of this event; I concede it sorrowfully,—as the little boy admitted the uniqueness of the vision of that kernel of the nut. But I insistently reply to the philosopher: When you wait and feel the impatience,—well, you feel—impatience. Impatience, however, is a *quale* of feeling, a sort of discomfort. As immediately felt, it does *not* present to you that character which you, the philosopher, regard as constituting the very essence of its temporal reality, viz., its character as this unique event in the endless life-striving that to your mind is the world.

Uniqueness, novelty, individuality,—these, I have said, cannot be described, and must be appreciated. But I have now added the reflection, just as true as the other: Uniqueness, novelty, individuality,—*these cannot be immediately* felt. They are no data of immediate experience. They are not given from moment to moment by life

as it passes. In terms of these characters we all to be sure interpret our experience. Whatever is, is individual. Each event in time is novel. Each fact of the real world is unique. But that this is true is neither to be adequately expressed through any of our processes of classifying objects, nor yet is this truth to be adequately presented to us by any datum of sense or of feeling. For a sensory datum or an immediate feeling does not immediately show you that it is unique in its own kind.

How then can we appreciate uniqueness, individuality, novelty, whether in the sequence of temporal facts, or otherwise? I answer, as I have elsewhere repeatedly argued: Uniqueness, individuality, novelty, can be *willed* in case of our own deeds, and can be *acknowledged* in case of our interpretations of objects and of persons not ourselves. When I act, I *will* this one act. I will that it shall be this act and no other. I do not immediately observe, I cannot by any classification describe, I cannot by any causal law explain, that or how this act is mine, and is unique, and never was done and never will be done by anybody else, or at any other time. But I will that this act shall be mine, and shall be an act that nobody else ever did, and shall constitute a temporal novelty. To will thus is precisely what is most essential to having a will of one's own.

And precisely so, by that particular sort of will which constitutes my acknowledgment and interpretation of reality, I can and do acknowledge that every fact in the world is as unique in its own individuality as my own acts of will are by me intended to be unique. And this is what I mean by calling all events in time novel events, individual events, unique events. Why I have a right thus to interpret all facts in terms of my will is a question that belongs not to the present discussion. Last year, in a discussion of the problem of Realism and Idealism before this Association, I briefly stated my case for the right of each of us to interpret his world as his own, and also to interpret his world as a genuine and individual whole of

reality,—to conceive reality as in its wholeness the expression of his rational will, and to conceive reality as for that very reason independent of his private caprices. However my realistic opponents may condemn this principle, each one of them when he states his case, as, for instance, Professor Spaulding or Professor Perry has done, gives us nothing whatever but his own interpretation of his own place in the system of facts, that he conceives thus and thus, and he conceives this system thus, because he finds the most rational expression of his own will in choosing to assert that the world is thus and thus, and in choosing to act accordingly. That this will to be one's self, and to have one's own world, and to live in the light of that world and in the acknowledgment of its fact, is no capricious individualism, but is simply the loyal will to conform to an absolute world will, and so to absolutely real standards: all this I have repeatedly maintained. And this is what the new Realism is trying, I think, to say. When our friends who state the case for any form of realism, new or old, insist that the real object is whatever my will, in so far as this will is merely the will to know, does not, must not now influence, they merely express the loyal will of any rational being first to conform his will to the absolute decision of the world will, and then only to find, through such conformity, the opportunity to discover what place in the rational system he yet in time and in his conduct can take. A man gives you in any case only his own interpretation of his world as he actively conceives that world; and this interpretation expresses his own will, so that every word that any realist ever utters inevitably tells you what he wills the world to be. If he says that his world is not the true expression of his rational will, he simply stultifies that will as he expresses it. But if he is a rational man, he wills the world to be the absolute decider for him as for all men, of whatever a rational being ought to accept as the objective truth. And so, of course, the realist expresses his will to be rational by renouncing his will to be personally and pri-

vately capricious; and this appeal to what the absolute will decides is the only appeal that anybody can make to reality. The new realist ill expresses this, I take it, in saying that knowing does not influence its object. The question is not one of influence, but of decision. He decides to submit to the world will.

Now our acknowledgment of the time world is simply a special form of this will to be rational by means of finding for my individual will its place in the order of the individual deeds of the world will. And so a time sequence, viewed as it really is, that is, as a rational being really wills it to be, is viewed as a sequence of novel and individual events, each expressing somebody's present will to do something unique, and to find his own place in the world. That is my own theory of what constitutes the reality of the time world. Of course such a view of the temporal aspect of things is a part in my own mind, of a voluntaristic idealism, and nobody here present wants to be burdened with any more of my own idealism than is absolutely necessary to the exigencies of this discussion. But the resulting view of time and of its reality is at this point, I hope, fairly obvious. I agree with Bergson that the conceptual time of the time-measuring sciences is not any adequate expression of the temporal aspect of reality. I agree also that the reality of time is the reality of life and of action. I wholly disagree with this writer in so far as he supposes the genuine and deeper reality of time to be at all adequately present as an object of our immediate experience, whether that be an experience of a sensory succession, or of a feeling of impatience. It is not what a man merely feels that gets him into genuine touch with deeper reality. It is what a man wills to do. Now the temporal form of experience is to my mind primarily the form of the will. One wills that each new act *shall be* unique. One believes that the world really contains unique events. One believes this for a reason which is substantially identical with one's reason for acknowledging that, in dealing with the world, one is deal-

ing with the decisive will of the world, and with the ordered series of deeds in terms of which the world's whole will is expressed. To say: "This event never happened before and can never happen again" is to say something that nobody can now verify, and that nobody can state in terms of an abstract conception of universal law. It is also to interpret the data of sense as in their totality the expressions of what Münsterberg well calls the will that there shall be a world. This expression of the will that there shall be a world is never given to us in its totality by any datum of sense. Whatever we merely find in life is an inadequate expression of the will to live, and demands from us further deeds of adjustment and of conquest. So far as these deeds are conceived by us to be expression of any coherent individual plan of life, they are viewed as such that each act of the will presupposes what is already done as its own irrevocable past, and passes on to its own real future, that is, to the deeds that are yet to be done. Hence the time order is conceived by us as a series whose ordinal relation is the relation of the deed already done to the deed yet to be done. We conceive all the wills of other individuals in terms of the same universal will to have a real world. And hence all the acts that are done are conceived as ordered in the same time order. The time order as a totality is the order in which the world will is conceived to live out the whole of its life, to do the totality of its deeds,—deeds whereof the acts of each individual, at any moment, are examples. Our right to this conception is our right to have any real world at all. We never merely find nor yet merely define the real world. We will that world. We have a right to do so.

To complete this outline sketch of a theory of the real time order, of its novelties, of its uniqueness, and of its significance, there is one aspect of the interpretation of the time order that still remains to be mentioned. I can here only mention it. I cannot dwell upon it. To conceive the time order as real, and its parts as really inter-

related in the way that I have outlined, is inevitably to conceive that the world will actually has its total expression in the entire time process of deeds, and so of events, past, present, and to come. If an individual right hand glove is real, and if an individual left hand glove is also real, and if they are mates, then the pair of gloves whereof these two mates are the units, is itself real, and so, if the past of the time order is real, and if the future of the time order is real, and if past and future belong together, then the whole of the time order has its own reality as a whole. Since, however, the future time order is not just now temporally and transiently a present datum, but is precisely the totality of future events, and since an analogous proposition holds of the past, the whole time order is real not at any one temporal instant, but precisely as a time-inclusive totality. And that is precisely what I myself mean by an eternal reality. By the eternal I mean not in the least the timeless, but the totality of temporal events viewed precisely as a totality. That such an eternal is real, not at any one instant, but as an eternal, is as sure as that if the fingers of a living hand are real, the whole hand of which these are the fingers is itself a reality. The temporal not merely implies the eternal; in its wholeness it constitutes the eternal,—namely, the total decision of the world will, wherein the loyal will to be rational finds its own fulfillment.

JOSIAH ROYCE.

HARVARD UNIVERSITY.

THE ETHICS OF PLATO.

R. G. BURY.

IN attempting within the limits of a short article to give an account of the ethical theory of a writer so voluminous as Plato, I am attempting, as I am well aware, a task of no ordinary difficulty. For the shortcomings in the