
ETERNALISM AS THERAPY: MOURNING THE DEATH OF MICHAEL BESSO

BY

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Abstract: It is often assumed that an eternalist and a presentist will have the same emotional response to life's events because, regardless of one's metaphysical beliefs, we all have the same phenomenological experience of time passing and it is this experience that is relevant to emotional response. I question the assumption that beliefs about the metaphysics of time can have little impact on one's emotional responses and establish the position that scientific and metaphysical beliefs can offer succour.

1. *Introduction*

On the death of his friend Michael Besso, Albert Einstein wrote,

Now Besso has departed from this strange world a little ahead of me. That means nothing. People like us, who believe in physics, know that the distinction between past, present and future is only a stubbornly persistent illusion.

This declaration by Einstein, in a letter to Besso's family, provides a specific backdrop for a more general question: how can our beliefs about physics and metaphysics impact on our emotional responses?¹ And, in particular, how can one's belief that all events are eternal change one's emotional attitude towards bereavement?

Pacific Philosophical Quarterly 102 (2021) 504–514 DOI: 10.1111/papq.12355

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By way of background, I start by considering why anyone might believe, as Einstein claimed that he and Besso did, that the distinction between past, present and future is only an illusion. I then consider the emotional responses of such a believer to bereavement – why would Einstein, or anyone, claim that holding such a belief about time renders the death of a friend meaningless?

There is no evidence to suggest that Einstein's comment has been taken seriously. Certainly, there has been little, if anything, written on the impact of a fervent belief regarding the metaphysics of time on one's attitude towards events such as the death of a friend. In his *A Brief History of the Philosophy of Time*, Adrian Bardon (2013) says:

As much as Einstein may have intellectually grasped the truth of this view about time, could he truly have derived much comfort from it upon the loss of a friend? If so, he was surely one of the only people ever to do so. The disconnect between what one knows and what one feels, in this instance, is striking. (p. 97)

Slightly more hopeful is Barry Dainton's (2010) observation that, 'If it were not for our deep-seated ("stubborn") bias towards the future, th(e) idea [that all times are equally real] would be more comforting than it actually is' (p. 408).

Einstein believes that there is no objective distinction between the past, the present and the future. Yet, still, we expect Einstein to feel emotions of bereavement and sadness, presumably caused by an impression that his companion no longer exists. The significant contribution of this paper is to question the assumption that beliefs about the metaphysics of time can have little impact on one's emotional experiences and to begin to establish the position that scientific and metaphysical belief can offer succour. The matter is of relevance to philosophical debate. In addition, the proposal offers the promise of development as a practical tool in dealing with bereavement. Those who hold religious or spiritual beliefs can turn to such beliefs for comfort in times of distress, such as when faced with bereavement. However, many in our society are not religious and so cannot take comfort from religious doctrine. The practical purport of this piece of philosophy is to propose that the eternalist framework can offer emotional comfort to those who are so limited.²

2. *Presentism and eternalism*

To understand why one might believe that the distinction between the past, present and future is illusory, it is useful to draw an analogy between space and time. I am located in the UK as I write this. Every day I walk my dogs on a beach that is close to where I live. There are other places

that I may never be spatially close to: the Sydney Opera House, for example. The fact that the Sydney Opera House is, and may always be, spatially distant from me gives no reason for me to believe that it does not exist nor to believe that it exists in a different way from the beach where I walk my dogs. This is because the property of existence varies neither with special location nor with the relative distance of that location from me or any other agent. That is to say, locational presentness is not relevant to existence. When I'm walking on my beach, I can truly say that the Sydney Opera House is not here yet still believe that it exists. Furthermore, it does not even make much sense, at least in common parlance, to say that it does not exist here – only that it's not here.

Would we say the same thing about temporal presentness? Those who are attracted to presentism, a version of the A-theory according to which only things that exist currently exist, would not.³ However, those who prefer eternalism believe that, just like locational presentness, temporal presentness is not relevant to existence – everything exists eternally.⁴ According to eternalism, although we might say that the Battle of Hastings is not currently, from the perspective of 2016, occurring, that has no significance on the existence of the event. The Battle of Hastings does exist and, as it exists eternally, it exists now. The Battle of Hastings, and all that the event contains – the Duke of Normandy, King Harold and so on –, have exactly the same qualities of existence as today's events.⁵ Likewise for future events. I cannot describe to you the celebrations that take place to mark the end of the century as they are opaque to me, but that is a purely epistemic matter. Those celebrations exist just as the Battle of Hastings exists and my current typing on the keyboard exists. In summary, for the eternalist, the events of what we call the past, the present and the future are all equally real and they are all equally real now. No time is ontologically privileged.⁶

My purpose is not to defend eternalism. Instead, my argument assumes a belief in eternalism as its starting point. I then question whether having an already established belief in the actuality of eternalism can impact on how one feels about events such as the death of a loved one.

3. *Thank goodness that's over*

Having said that there has been little attention given to the relationship between beliefs about the structure of time and how they may impact on our emotional responses to events, I will now discuss a related topic of which much has been said. The reader who is familiar with writings in the Philosophy of Time may suggest that the topic of Arthur Prior's seminal paper 'Thank Goodness That's Over' is relevant. In this section, I discuss

Prior's paper as it addresses issues that have overlap with those I am concerned with here.

In 'Thank Goodness That's Over', Prior is concerned with how a logically rigorous, tenseless language might represent our common talk about enduring and changing individuals. He is motivated by N. L. Wilson's (1955) proposal that we can move straightforwardly from a space-time language to a substance language if 'the time determinant is shifted across the copula of empirical sentences from subject to predicate' (Wilson, 1955, p. 592). An example of this would be the move from the space-time sentence 'Arthur-at-midday is drunk' to the substance language sentence 'Arthur is drunk-at-midday'. Prior is sympathetic to the cause, but he expresses concern with the proposal. What, we might ask, is this property of being drunk-at-midday? And, in any case, says Prior, the ordinary language defender will push the point that tenseless language simply cannot capture the meaning that we express with ordinary language sentences. The proof of this point, according to Prior (1959), can be given as follows:

One says, e.g., Thank goodness that's over!, and not only is this, when said, quite clear without any date appended, but it says something which it is impossible that any use of a tenseless copula with a date should convey. It certainly does not mean the same as, e.g. 'Thank goodness the date of the conclusion of that thing is Friday, June 15, 1954', even if it be said then. (Nor, for that matter, does it mean 'Thank goodness the conclusion of that thing is contemporaneous with this utterance'. Why should anyone thank goodness for that?) (p. 17)

Prior's point is a now familiar one. Essentially, he is working to persuade us that there are tensed beliefs that lose their intended meaning when expressed with a tenseless counterpart. In other words, if we find Prior convincing, we will believe that tensed beliefs cannot be identified with tenseless beliefs. This would be relevant if my aim was to persuade the reader of eternalism, as the apparent irreducibility of tensed beliefs to tenseless beliefs is cited as a problem for the eternalism. As I stated earlier, that is not my purpose. We can further assume that the eternalist will not view the irreducibility of ordinary language to tenseless language as a relevant factor when forming metaphysical beliefs.

The question we are concerned with is whether a person with an already established belief in eternalism can rationally employ that belief to avoid the emotional reaction that is caused by the consideration of a tensed belief such as 'Besso no longer exists'. In others words, while Prior highlighted the irreducibility of tensed to tenseless language and the problem that this causes for eternalism, I am assuming eternalism and asking whether it can be used as a tool against the lure of false, but immediately appealing, tensed beliefs.

4. *Beliefs about physics and everyday beliefs*

What Einstein discovered were facts about the nature of time, facts that contradicted common beliefs. Can we then assume that Einstein's discovery would have an impact on his associated everyday beliefs? Not necessarily. In 'The Evil of Death: What Can Metaphysics Contribute?' (2012), Ted Sider argues that there is no rule telling us whether to adjust value in light of new information about the underlying nature of things. He considers whether having a clear view of what death is will help us decide whether death is bad: does discovering some feature about the underlying nature of reality change one's view regarding the value of death? According to Sider, it depends. It depends on the kind of facts that we discover. For example, discovering that death is a change in the arrangement of particles is unlikely to stop us from viewing death as an evil, whereas discovering that there is an afterlife is much more likely to have that effect. When trying to decide the moral significance of our discoveries, we must be careful, Sider warns, to bear in mind the distinction between ordinary and underlying facts. Metaphysics is tasked with discovering the facts that underlie the ordinary facts: ordinary facts are just what you would expect them to be, facts about ordinary objects, for example, that the apple is red, that the table is flat and so on. Underlying facts are the underlying descriptions of the objects, such as the physical description of the object that we call 'apple'. Intuitively, ordinary facts are more relevant for value ascription and, while Sider (2012) allows that value conclusions can be drawn from metaphysical commitments, 'they must be drawn with the distinction between ordinary facts and their underlying reality clearly in view' (p. 157).

But how are we to adjust value when the new information about the underlying nature of things contradicts the appearance of reality? Our discoveries about the underlying nature of the apple do not contradict our beliefs that the apple is red and round, rather they describe a different level of analysis. This is not the case with Einstein's discoveries about the nature of time. Eternalism is not a different level of analysis of time, an analysis that sits below our ordinary conception that time exists as a dynamic entity. Rather eternalism dictates that our ordinary beliefs about time are mistaken. To restate our question using Sider's wording, we are wondering whether there is a rule telling us whether to adjust value in light of new information about the underlying nature of things, when that information contradicts our beliefs about the ordinary facts.

A hard-line rationalist might be tempted to argue that, of course, when we make a discovery that contradicts beliefs that turn out to be based on illusion, we should revise those ordinary beliefs. But such a response may be practically unsatisfactory. There are some beliefs that, while we recognise them to be false, we acknowledge as being in the least useful and at most

necessary to living a full existence. A good example of such a belief is given by epistemic scepticism. In his *Treatise* (1978, p. 269), Hume persuades us that he does not and cannot know that the external world exists. He ponders the practical implications of this:

I am confounded with all these questions, and begin to fancy myself in the most deplorable condition imaginable, environ'd with the deepest darkness, and utterly depriv'd of the use of every member and faculty. Most fortunately it happens, that since reason is incapable of dispelling these clouds, nature herself suffices to that purpose, and cures me of this philosophical melancholy and delirium, either by relaxing this bent of mind, or by some avocation, and lively impression of my senses, which obliterate all these chimeras. I dine, I play a game of back-gammon, I converse, and am merry with my friends; and when after three or four hours' amusement, I would return to these speculations, they appear so cold, and strained, and ridiculous, that I cannot find in my heart to enter into them any farther.

Sometimes reason takes us to places that we simply do not want to go, such as entering into the practical implications of the belief that we can never be certain that the external world and other minds exist. As Hume puts it, nature has a way of pulling us back, by making the appearance of the external world and the appearance of the existence of other minds so vivid to us in our experiences that continued doubt becomes practically unsustainable. In any case, it is difficult to see the benefits that would be gained by brining such doubts into one's everyday interactions.

There are both similarities and differences between the practical import of Hume's beliefs about our knowledge of the external world and Einstein's belief about the nature of time. In both cases, the discovered 'cornerstone' belief contradicts our everyday beliefs: Hume's belief that we cannot know that the external world exists is incompatible with his everyday belief that he lives in Edinburgh. Einstein's belief that time is a static entity is incompatible with his everyday belief that the day is passing. However, as Hume points out, nature's interference with rationality in the case of scepticism is a welcome relief and one that Hume, and I would imagine every sceptic, is happy to help themselves to when it suits them. In the case of bereavement and Einstein's belief about time, the matter is entirely asymmetric. Here, it is reason that offers a remedy and nature that presents us with, to use Hume's words, 'the most deplorable condition'. Nature presents Einstein with the illusion that Besso has gone, that he no longer exists. Reason allows Einstein to reject this illusion and believe that Besso exists eternally.

When considering the death of Besso, Einstein has the resources of both reason and nature. It is clear from Einstein's letter that reason offers him comfort in this case. Surely, it would be irrational for Einstein to work against these resources with those offered by the illusion of nature.

5. *Mourning Besso*

It is undeniable that even a committed eternalist is likely to feel sad on the death of a friend. But what is far from obvious is the claim that they could not and would not reason some of the sadness away from the basis of their metaphysical beliefs and in particular, in considerations of the root of their sadness.

A number of eternal facts were revealed to Einstein on Besso's death. For example, Einstein discovered that he will not have lunch with Besso on 1 April. He discovered that there is no date after 15 March that hosts an event containing Michael Besso. Perhaps this is a genuine source of sadness. Suppose that Besso and Einstein had had 99 encounters during their years – Einstein has discovered that 99 is the limit of their encounters and, if quantity of encounters matters, then this too may be a genuine source of sadness. Likewise, Einstein might be saddened by discovering a fact about the length of Besso's life – that Besso lived for 81 years and not 82 or 100 may, again, be a legitimate source of sadness.

However, brief reflection will reveal to Einstein that these are not new facts, created on Besso's death. As eternalism is true, it has always been the case that Einstein and Besso's 99th meeting was their last. And it has always been the case that Besso's life spanned 81 years. We can assume that Einstein was aware that there would be a last time that he and Besso would meet and also that there would be a last day containing Besso events. We can also assume that Einstein did not mourn these facts about Besso on any other day. So what is the source of his sadness? Perhaps the source of sadness is not the death itself, but an epistemic fact – while Einstein will believe that the facts detailed earlier always existed, he was not always acquainted with them. It was only when Besso died that Einstein came to know that Besso's life spanned 81 years and that their 99th meeting was their last. However, this epistemic fact does not seem to be a good candidate for the sadness. The epistemic event, devoid of its metaphysical significance, loses much of its emotional clout. To demonstrate, consider that we can conceive of a circumstance in which Einstein came to know these facts of Besso's death while he and Besso were still young men. Would this knowledge have caused him sadness at the time of discovery? It is hard to imagine that it would. Everyone has to die sometime, and discovering that his friend would die at the age of 81 is, in itself, no source of sadness. If eternalism is true, if the known truth of Besso dying at 81 is not a source of sadness to the knower in 1925, it cannot in itself be a source of sadness in 1955. Of course, if Einstein discovered that Besso would die at a very young age or in a horrific accident that involved a lot of pain things would be

different. But they would, again, be different eternally. Einstein would be sad to discover these disturbing facts whenever he discovered them.

The source of Einstein's sadness cannot be his belief that Besso no longer exists for it is a consequence of Einstein's commitment to eternalism that Besso persists from 25 May 1873 until 15 March 1955, and this is true from any perspective, including the perspective of 20 March 1955 when Besso has been declared dead. Here, there might be some resistance. Surely, what is relevant to the sadness is the fact that from Einstein's perspective on 20 March 1955, Besso does not persist now.⁷ This is true. But, again, it is not clear that it is a legitimate source of sadness, at least not of the kind that we expect to trigger mourning. Relying on our spatial analogy again, Besso not being temporally present to Einstein on that date in 1955 is rather like my brother in Australia not being spatial present to me in the UK. He is distant from me and that causes me to miss him being here, but it is not a source of mourning. Perhaps the analogy is not quite right, for although my brother and I are spatially distant from my current perspective, it is metaphysically possible for us to be reunited in the future and knowledge of this may be a current source of relief for me. A better analogy would be one in which Besso volunteers for a space mission from which there can be no return such that Einstein and Besso are destined to be forever spatially distant, Einstein staying put on Earth while Besso settles down in a cosmic radiation shelter on Mercury. Certainly, this will make it impossible for Einstein and Besso to meet for coffee but, again, it is not a situation that is a worthy source of mourning.

On hearing of Besso's death, the source of Einstein's sadness cannot be that he will no longer participate in Einstein–Besso events for he is currently participating in 99 Einstein–Besso events at various places along the timeline. It is true that none of them are occurring simultaneously with Einstein's perspective on 20 March 1955. But it does not seem that this is a legitimate source of mourning as there were many moments during Einstein's life in which he did not experience an Einstein–Besso meeting simultaneous with his experience; that is, there were many moments when he and Besso were not together. Assuming that these moments are not sources of great sadness to him, it is still not clear why a current lack of Einstein–Besso events would be. Again, there might appear to be room for resistance here. Surely, the source of sadness is not that Einstein is not currently experiencing an Einstein–Besso event but that there are no Einstein–Besso events future to his current perspective. But as the eternalist allows for no distinction of significance between past and future events, the lack of meetings future to March 1955 cannot be a particular source of sadness. There exist 99 Einstein–Besso events. That all of them are earlier than 15 March 1955 is not in itself a source of sadness.

6. *The phenomenological character of experience*

We have limited ourselves to considering the features of objective reality according to the eternalist, tried and failed to anchor the sadness that we feel on the death of a loved one to some loss in the world. It would be futile to conclude that the sadness itself is irrational or unwarranted. However, working through the things that cannot be the rational source of grief for the eternalist does put bereavement in a different light. The question then arises: why would Bardon along with many others assume that grief is an inevitable result of bereavement, even for a staunch eternalist such as Einstein? There must be some source of grief that is assumed to be untouchable. In acknowledging a source of sadness that is immediately emotional, and not purely rational, we can bring clarity to the nature of mourning for the eternalist and provide a target for a reasoned reaction, such as the reaction of Einstein that we started with.

It is plausible that sadness in the face of bereavement is intimately connected to the phenomenological temporal character of experience. Regardless of the beliefs that he has about the nature of time, Einstein would, in common with everyone else, experience the world in a particular way as it appeared to move from moment to moment in his stream of consciousness. Einstein acknowledges this way of experiencing the world – it is the source of the stubbornly persistent illusion that he refers to, the illusion that the past, present and future are distinct. He may also acknowledge that the illusion can have psychological and physical effects, even on those who know that it is an illusion. The viewer of a 3-D movie knows that their perception that the Millennium Falcon has just passed over their heads is an illusion, but that does not stop them from ducking in their seats or from their hearts from palpitating as it ‘passes overhead’. What can the eternalist say about the time illusion? Certainly, they must accept that the illusion that the present is privileged seems useful for guiding some of our actions. It is the belief that the exam is tomorrow that pushes the student to study today. But must they insist that the illusion plays a role in our reflective emotions? Surely, it is plausible that Einstein’s belief that the past, present and future are uniform can override or at least change the emotions that immediately arise in him from the phenomenological character of experience. His belief that the world contains just as much Besso after Besso’s death as it did before his death, that he and Besso are sharing 99 Einstein–Besso experiences can offer him comfort. These beliefs are in stark contrast to the beliefs available to the presentist. And holding the eternalist beliefs is consistent with Einstein acknowledging that he will no longer have an immediate phenomenological experience of Besso. But for Einstein, it is simply the case that such an acknowledgement amounts to very little. Perhaps it does not ‘mean nothing’, as Einstein stated, but also, it does not mean everything. It only

has the value that phenomenal experience has within one's metaphysical framework. And, for the eternalist, as phenomenal experience provides an illusory image of reality, that phenomenal experience can be said to have very little value at all beyond our immediate response to it.

Sider may be right that there is no rule telling us how to adjust value in light of new information about the underlying nature of the world. But our beliefs about the nature of time and the implications of such beliefs on existence can seep into our attitudes about everyday events. We react to a situation instinctively initially, and then we are capable of rationalising that initial response. Contra Bardon, it seems very plausible that Einstein did receive comfort from his eternalist beliefs and, more generally, that those also who believe in eternalism, for independent or scientific reasons, can similarly garner comfort.

7. *Acknowledgements*

I am grateful to anonymous referees for this journal, Christoph Hoerl, my colleagues at the University of Aberdeen and audiences at the University of Stirling, Yonsei University, and the Centre for Philosophy of Time for helpful feedback and suggestions that greatly improved this paper.

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NOTES

¹ Bardon (2013, pp. 96–97) suggests that Einstein spoke these words as Besso's funeral. Elsewhere (Hoffmann 1972, pp. 257–258), it is suggested that Einstein wrote these words in a letter to Besso's children. Of course, both claims could be accurate.

² The presentist, meanwhile, can help themselves to an Epicurean attitude to death. See Olsen (2012) for a discussion of such a view. Here, I am assuming a belief in eternalism as a start point.

³ The simple A-theory was first laid out as such by J. E. M. McTaggart (1908), but there are various ontological permutations. The Moving Spotlight Theory, as defined but not defended by Broad (1923), has it that the present moves along a timeline, like a spotlight. Broad himself preferred a different variant known as the Growing Block Theory (see Broad 1923 and, more recently, Forrest 2004 and Tooley 1997). Presentism, the classic version of which is given in Prior (1968), is perhaps the most popular version of the A-theory and is the version that I refer to in this paper.

⁴ I will use the term eternalism for what is sometimes called 'the Block view'. All ontological eternalists are committed to what is called the 'B-theory'. There are a couple of variations of the B-theory that differ in terms of how we are to think of the relation between space and time: is

time very similar to space, as current theory in physics would have it, or is time just analogous with space? I will not take a stand on this here.

⁵ Natural language is our enemy when writing in this debate. The idea that something is not currently current yet is currently occurring at some other time is a difficult one to express. For a classic discussion of this problem, see Prior's (1959). Likewise, even for a B-theorist, an utterance of 'x exists now' need not be true if 'x exists now' means 'x is located at the time of this utterance'.

⁶ One might have a view that all times are equally real yet some times are privileged, such as the Moving Spotlight view outlined in footnote 3. But, as I am using the term here, eternalism is the combination of the view that all times are equally real and no time is ontologically privileged.

⁷ Or, to put it another way, that an utterance of the sentence 'Besso has died' would be true.

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