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AGAINST DETENSERS
(*Not for tenses*)¹

*If there is Becoming,
the physicists must know it.
(Hans Reichenbach)*

*If there is Becoming, but
the physicists cannot know it, nobody can.
(Helena Eilstein)*

Abstract. The *T/P* dispute, between *transientism* and *permanentism*, concerns the objectivity of the concept of *becoming*. By *detensors* I mean those permanentists who try to make their point by semantical analysis of 'temporal language'. I criticize that type of argumentation as well as some other arguments leveled by either party. If the dispute might be at least hypothetically resolved, that would have to be by means of analyzing the basic theories of contemporary science. It turns out, however, against that background that *permanentism* is *irrefutable even in case it is false*. The commitment to *transientism* is cognitively unwarranted although it is the attitude we tend to assume in practical life.

1. A LONG MARCH TOWARD THE MAIN TOPIC OF THIS ESSAY.

An old and persisting metaphysical dispute focuses on the problem *whether the concept of happening or [synonymously] becoming of events pertains to the very way of existing of the universe*; in other words, *whether the way of existing of the universe consists in the incessant succession of temporal triads whose members — that is, the respective Past, Present and Future — objectively differ from one another*.

Those who answer the above question in the affirmative are referred to in this essay as representatives of that or another version of the metaphysical hypothesis of *transientism*. Those who answer it in the negative are referred to as representatives of *permanentism*. The dispute in question is referred to here as the *T/P* dispute. That is meant to be taken as a conventional name, which should not suggest that only the above standpoints are represented in the dispute; neither should it suggest that only the above standpoints can be consistently advocated in it. One should expect, indeed, the defense, by some disputants, of the view that the problem cannot be solved (in the form of a well-corroborated hypothesis) against the background of contemporary science — as well as of the view that the problem cannot be solved (in the form of a well-corroborated hypothesis) within the confines of science, at any stage its development; which for some disputants would amount to the claim that neither the affirmative nor the negative answer can be legitimately accepted within the confines of human knowledge. Let me state here at the outset that the view in whose favor I speak in this

paper also does not coincide with either the affirmative or the negative answer to the above problem.

One admissible way of conceptualizing the *T/P* dispute is to conceive it as concerning the acceptability of the fundamental thesis of transientism. In my essay this way of conceptualization prevails.

In the center of my interest in this essay are questions *concerning the legitimacy of some specific ways of conducting the dispute by some of its protagonists as well as concerning the real strength of some arguments typically offered by either party*. In order, however, to get a necessary background for the said analysis I have first to give a brief outline of the doctrines of transientism and permanentism.

I do it by way of paraphrasing (perhaps not entirely in accordance with the author's intention) and developing a passage from a paper of D. Zeilicovici, who is a transientist.

The attribution of pastness operates somewhat like the attribution of existence in the Kantian sense: it applies to the event complete with all its properties and only defines its status (for Kant existence, for us pastness).²

I believe that in order to clearly and consistently explicate his point of view it is best for the transientist to adopt a conceptual frame where a sharp distinction is made between *the set of properties and the spatiotemporal location* of an individual (like an event) on the one hand and its *ontological status* or, in other words, its *mode of existence* on the other. Together with his opponents the transientist acknowledges that, in contradistinction to individuals of the thing category (—'continuants'), *the sameness of an event involves the sameness of the entire set of its properties: events do not undergo qualitative changes*. Also, in contradistinction to individuals of the thing category, *the sameness of an event involves the sameness of its spatiotemporal location* (as well as of any other of its relations to other events). The transientist insists, however, that the above stipulation is compatible with the stipulation that the temporal way of existing of the universe consists in events successively changing their ontological statuses.

A difference between various versions of transientism must be taken into account here. All transientists who in principle accept the above conceptual scheme must acknowledge the reality — the objectivity (mind-independtness) — of *futurity, presentness and pastness* as ontological statuses successively acquired by every event (maybe with the exception of the Big Bang, if it was a definite event). Nowadays, however, the prevailing version of transientism is the one to which the name of *possibilism* is assigned in my essay. It also comes in varieties, of which a distinction will be drawn later on in this essay. From the point of view of possibilism futurity, presentness and pastness should be considered *derivative ontological statuses* of events, with the role of *fundamental ontological statuses* being assigned to *open possibility, actuality and extinguished possibility*. The derivative statuses should be defined, and their reality explained, in terms of the fundamental ones. Thus, e.g., according to some possibilists the Future is the spatiotemporal locus of nothing but open possibilities while the Past, with the Present as its closure, is the spatiotemporal locus of both acts and extinguished possibilities. According to other possibilists the Future is the locus of open possibilities, future acts and extinguished possibilities.

In the latter view a *future act* is understood as an event which is already *bound to happen* at some future time — bound so, maybe (although not necessarily), due to some respective *deterministic nomic relations binding it to some events which did already happen*.

According to all *classical* versions of possibilism (of which more will be said below) an event becomes present — happens — *factualizes* — when it is no more simultaneous to any open possibility.

Note that in the version of possibilism which admits the existence of future acts one has to distinguish between two kinds of change of ontological statuses of originally open possibilities: *actualization* and *factualization*. One, however, also has to stipulate that for some originally open possibilities these two kinds of ontological change temporarily coincide. Also, in a pair of such originally open possibilities which eventually actualize and subsequently factualize, each in its due time, the temporal order of actualization may be opposite to the temporal order of factualization.

Actualization of an event, even before its factualization, imposes the status of extinguished possibility (in the Future) on all those formerly open possibilities whose subsequent happening would be logically or nomologically incompatible with the happening of the event in question. *A fortiori*, the happening of a hitherto open possibility brings about the same transformation of the status of all such hitherto open possibilities which would be incompatible *in actu* with the said factualized one.

To use a contemporary terminology (which is alien to the languages of common sense and of Newtonian physics, but is useful, nevertheless, in illuminating some aspects of these views too) — according to *classical transientism* (in all its versions) and, in particular, according to *classical possibilism* (in all its versions) the growing Past and the diminishing Future constitute 'layers' of spacetime, divided by the ever shifting Now as the closure of the Past. In this essay the term '*possibilism*' refers to that classical — '*Aristotelian*' — possibilism.³ with exception of the passage where a nonclassical version of possibilism (and thus of transientism) is briefly discussed. The following points are of paramount importance for the proper understanding of transientism.

First, *the fundamental, from the point of view of the possibilist, ontological statuses of events — actuality, open possibility, extinguished possibility — have to be conceived as absolute (that is, nonrelational). The same concerns the ontological statuses acknowledged by all varieties of transientism. The ontological statuses of pastness, presentness and futurity are supposed to be had (when they are had) by particular events in themselves, and not relative to these or other events, whatever their ontological statuses; not relative to instants of time (whatever one's theory of instants may be); not relative to anybody's knowledge or ability to acquire knowledge of the current ontological status of this or that event; not relative to anybody's perception or awareness of anything. Thus, e.g., it may be true at a given instant that a given event is, say, present or past, but that does not mean that it is present or past just with respect to that instant, while being in some other ontological status with respect to some other instant. Indeed, while presentness is a transitory and nonrelativizable ontological status of events, the presentness of an instant also has to be understood as its transitory and nonrelativizable characteristics, consisting in the presentness of events with the corresponding spatiotemporal location.*

The stipulation that an event becomes present *when* it is no more simultaneous to any open possibility is not inconsistent at all with the stipulation about the absoluteness of ontological statuses of events: for it still holds against the background of that stipulation that *when an event becomes present, there is nothing such that 'with respect to it' it would be not present.*

An instant may be just that instant at which an event in question is temporally located, while some other events and other instants precede or succeed that event in time — thus belonging, respectively, to the Past or to the Future *when* the event in question is present — but the transitory, instantaneous ontological status of presentness of the event in question cannot be defined in terms of any temporal relations, like simultaneity and precedence, and that accords with the nonrelational character of that ontological status.

Second, in the view of transientism *no event can at any time be in none of the above ontological states. The transitions between them have a character of unanalyzable 'timeless' jumps.*

Any doctrine which does not incorporate the above two transientistic stipulations is not a *bona fide* transientism, even if its representatives, as it often indeed happens among the protagonists of the *T/P* dispute, pay a lip service to transientism.

Let me make explicit a point inherent in the above considerations.

The concept of the growing Past and diminishing Future as two 'layers' partitioning spacetime across the temporal dimension, with the shifting Present as the closure of the Past, is characteristic for classical transientism. It was easy for that doctrine to see itself in concord with Newtonian physics (though the latter by no means implies it). Indeed, against the background of the Newtonian views on space and time — or, to use again contemporary terminology, *against the background of the Newtonian theory of spacetime, conceived as the uniquely foliated continuum of successive instants (instantaneous three-dimensional spaces)* — it was natural for the transientist to stipulate that the successive positions of the shifting Now *partition* the totality of events of all ontological statuses into classes of *genuine — absolute — simultaneity*, which were supposed to correspond to the Newtonian instants of time. The partition of the totality of events according to the relation of *Copresentness* had to coincide with the partition of that totality into the classes of *genuine simultaneity*; where *Copresentness* is to be understood (in this conceptual scheme) as the time-invariant relation between events which *belong or belonged or will belong* to the same Now.⁴ From the contemporary point of view the above stipulation associated transientism with the idea of a *privileged stratification of spacetime into instants*. The questions whether the contemporary transientist has a reason to look for a way to disentangle his doctrine from the association with that idea; and in case he does, can he do it in an unobjectionable way, are arduously disputed at the contemporary stage of the *T/P* dispute. *The problem is particularly acute for possibilistic transientism.*

Let me proceed with my characteristic of transientism. The supporter of this doctrine who accepts the conceptual frame of ontological modes of existence should also, I believe, admit there the concept of nontransitory *Existence* of events or, in other words, of nontransitory *Occurrence* of events — or, in still other words, the concept of nontransitory *Reality* of events. That would result in the admission not only of tensed, but also of tenseless forms (modes) of verbs, including the verb '*to Exist*' into his

specific language. (As it seems natural for the user of an Indo-European language, in this text the tenseless form of a verb will be homonymous with the form of the present tense). '*To Exist*', with reference to events — or '*to Occur*', as I will prefer to speak — would mean for the transientist to be in any of the above, in general transitory, modes of existence.

Transientism, of course, is obliged to answer the fundamental question: what does the transience of events consist in and on the basis of what evidence should we assume that the concept of the transient *Now* has an objective significance.

Transientists give a number of answers to that question. Different answers do not necessarily contradict one another; they also may complement one another.

According to some transientists (e.g. C.D. Broad) the concept of becoming just corresponds to the most fundamental feature of the temporal aspect of the way of existing of the universe. Accordingly, it is *essentially indefinable*. It owes its meaningfulness to its being directly rooted in our experience, particularly in our basic, everyday, prescientific experience — let us call it *the primary experience*.

It seems to me — although I am unable to support my view with a reference to corresponding explicit assertions — that in the view of some thinkers the transience of events is a 'result' of the *efficacy of causes*. According to this view causes '*produce*' *their effects* — or, synonymously, '*precipitate them*', '*make them to happen at a due time*'. Even if at a given time a given event enjoys the status of a future act, it must yet be '*made*' to '*factualize*' (that is, to happen); and it is the 'way of operation of causes' which has to take the responsibility for the 'lapse of time' between an event 'becoming inevitable' and that event 'happening'. It is sometimes claimed that the efficacy of causes is directly manifested in our primary experiences, like the experience of being pushed or pulled. The need to resort to *dynamical concepts* in our description of physical processes and nomic relations between them also may be supposed by some to be a decisive evidence in favor of the efficacy concept of causation.

The efficacy theory of causation seems to me responsible for the fact that *transientism is not necessarily associated with possibilism*. Indeed, in the epoch of classical physics scientists typically took both transientism and determinism for granted. The Future represented for them the collection of all those events which were ever bound to happen at the due time, but were not yet 'made' to factualize.

In the possibilistic version of the efficacy theory of causation causes are thought of as endowed with various degrees of *propensity* to produce these or other of their alternative possible effects. Note however that the possibilist does not need to commit himself to the efficacy theory of causation. He may maintain that regardless of whether the efficacy theory of causation is adequate, the flow of time 'basically consist' in the successive actualizations and corresponding attendant extinctions of originally open possibilities.

Now however, at the end of this long march to the main topic of my essay, let me shortly present the basic thesis of permanentism.

Cast in the specific language of the transientist (which is richer, as far as the problems pertaining to the nature of time are concerned, than the specific language of the permanentist; and which, accordingly, provides one with means to explicitly formulate *both* contending metaphysical hypotheses), permanentism amounts to the claim that *the universe is nothing but the totality of Existing acts* which may — and in

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