In Search of the Present

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1. *How Should We Think of the Present*?

Honore de Balzac wrote a story titled "The Quest of the Absolute."[1] It is a literary piece, filled with characters and events, but the chief theme of which is a person's pure drive toward reaching the ultimate, the *ne plus ultra*, the thatness of existence. This motif is also the propelling idea in Balzac's "The Unknown Masterpiece,"[2] which describes a painter's effort to capture artistically, reality itself in its full actuality. Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*[3] is also essentially a search for the absolute. For him, though, the absolute resided in past ecstasies that he had experienced in his life which he wanted to recapture and describe accurately. Taken to the extreme, such devotion to the past can be morally inadvisable, even destructive. In any case, like it or not, the past has always an undeniable staying power. William Faulkner exclaimed in frustration: "The past is not even past!," meaning that unpleasant memories that he wanted to obliterate kept mercilessly following him into the present. In his *Lived Time*, Eugéne Minkowski rejected the delusions of nostalgia and rightly pointed out that the "past when it was present had nothing more seductive in it than the present which overwhelms us, and we speak of the good old times only because we project into them, without realizing it, what our present seems to deny us."[4] In fact, the present has its own ecstatic potential; in this it is not essentially different from the past. And even more important, it does exhibit explicitly the effective possibility of renewal. Nostalgia is dangerous because it can blind the mind to the potentialities of present existence; having eyes only for the immediate obstacles makes us forget that, in effect, obstacles were also present in the past. The Kierkegaardian phrase "Everything that does not happen immediately is diabolic" has more than one pregnant meaning. One, of course, is the obvious one that delays are very often frustrating and boring. A weightier one is that any unfulfilled expectation can close our mind to the present's own rewarding capabilities.

Further, just as nostalgia can dominate the present, so can also an exciting anticipation. Both states of mind are able to lessen the

present's own potentialities. Anticipation, in particular, disguises the fact that, no matter how much the future is pulling us now, the present is where novelties actually occur. Whatever we do we do it now or not at all.

This work attempts to capture aspects of the real nature of the present, delving to some extent into its complex constitution. As such, it belongs to what we should call "concrete semantics": it tries to elucidate fragments of the concealed meaning of the word "present," an infinite meaning to be sure, impossible to apprehend in full – as is the case with the meaning of any word that has a concrete reference. In order to move in such a direction, we shall use suitable categories and ideas regardless of their origin and of the time when they were expressed first. We shall find it useful to draw notions and models from physics, mathematics, cosmology, psychology, and even Buddhism, but shall place them in a different context. Since we are leaping into the unknown, we need any light that dispels the obscurities generated by the usual simplistic conception of time we all have inherited. We shall proceed, however, in the knowledge that fully capturing the present in the flesh is an infinite task: the finiteness of our existence and the limits of our perception set impassable barriers to such ambition. And yet, like Balzac's painter, we are driven by a powerful desire to depict the present in its full actuality. A positive outcome of our attempt will be that, despite the essential incompleteness of any effort to apprehend the concrete, our direct perception of the present will be broadened and deepened, our actual grasp will reach regions that our abstract, predetermined conceptions make us overlook. Let us, then, proceed by stages.

2. *The Present is Not a Point in Time*

Just as for Proust the absolute resides in past ecstasies, for us the absolute must have the present as one of its characteristics. Both past and future have effects on us as long as memories and prospective objectives have a strong presence in our consciousness now, fill the present now. This implies that the present is not a simple point without extension; in fact, no matter how much it can be divided, it always contains past and future components: the lasting momentum of past events, good and bad remembrances, scars, inherited platforms from which to leap forward, and also aspirations, old and new aims, the determination to move in a given direction, desire, hope. Both physically and psychologically the present

inevitably spreads within itself. It is not possible to pinpoint its beginning or its end, because it fades gradually into other presents with which it intersects, often unnoticeably. Each present contains a microcosmos within itself, an actual world that I would like to call *the realm of the interpresent.* Clearly, we are very far indeed from the mathematical conception of point as Euclid defined it: "A point is that which has no part."[5]

The idea of a point is, of course, an eminently useful abstraction, but it has no reality whatsoever: there are no real points in the universe, infinite divisibility does not end in entities without extension. To live a present means to spread ourselves within an enduring, identifiable lapse. Such lapse can be analysed into other lapses, other hazy intervals, but never into instantaneous points. The present is an extended passage, itself always a course of time that has no precise boundaries; it is fluid, its emergence and fading are gradual, and its brief evolution can be neither explained nor described by purely temporal categories: it is a running aspect of a flowing reality, a reality without which it has no existence. George Herbert Mead expressed similar ideas in his *Philosophy of the Present.* He said that "reality cannot be reduced to instants,"[6] meaning temporal points. More specifically, "Past, present and future belong to a passage which attains temporal structure through the event, and they may be considered long or short as they are compared with other such passages."[7] In other words, the present possesses its own spread, which is why it is possible to attempt to make a partial inventory of the present. In contrast, a point cannot contain any fragment of reality, precisely because it has no parts. Again, there are no temporal points. But contrary to Mead, who thinks that past and future are boundaries of the present,[8] both past and future impinge on the present, are present in the present; otherwise, they would be nonexistent. Further, no present has an immediately preceding present or an immediately following one. Presents can intersect, but they are not contiguous in any geometric sense: between two identifiable presents one can always find other presents that actively encroach on one another. We usually are aware of the peak portion of each extended present and erroneously think of such a peak as being the entire present. But time is more complex than a linear succession of peaks. This complexity, this constant overlapping of lapses, is what makes consequence possible. A time made up of isolated points would be the reflection of a

constantly disappearing and recreated universe; the present cosmos would have no possible communication with other realities differently dated: no overlapping, no causality.

As a consequence, the notion of abruptness is very relative. What emerges in a seemingly abrupt manner has a preparation and a lysis no matter how brief these might be. What seems an instantaneous decision contains the push of preceding acts of awareness that converge to the act of decision and are present in such an act to carry us over into the neighboring future. During this passage the past awareness, our prior wishes and deliberations, all change quality and momentum. The past is not irrevocable; on the contrary, it is highly malleable. As Mead sees it, there is no permanent character in any physical object independent of its changes,[9] and so it is with any mental state – that is, the past is not even past!

The present is part of existence; there would not be time without an existing reality. But also there is no present without a past that lasts and keeps transforming itself as an enduring part of that very existence. There is, indeed, an identifiable permanence in any emergent change. This is the inescapable paradox of becoming, the fact that the essence of a concreteness in process is an irreducible, constant difference-in-identity and identity-in-difference. Every effort at trying to dismantle the paradox, or dismiss the contradiction as a confusing misunderstanding, only ends up in perverting our comprehension of the facts, in veiling reality in the flesh as it really is. Facts are often intrinsically contradictory, a situation nobody can do anything about, nor one we should attempt to dismiss for the sake of simplifying our thinking.

Neither the past nor the future can, then, be removed form the present; nevertheless, some presents belong to such an energetic undertaking, are so much dominated by the act of consummation of which they are a part that both past and future fade away from our attention. This is particularly true of creative acts during which the overall sense of time recedes. In these instances we cannot really focus on the fact that we are existing now, even though such now is so strongly lived. Charles Peirce hinted at this situation when he commented on how "extremely difficult it is to bring our attention to elements of experience which are continually present..., to perceive what stares us in the face with a glare that, once noticed, becomes almost oppressive with its insistence."[10]

Without a sameness that endures, there can be no perceivable object, no memory, no self. On the other hand, without real change,

there can be no process in the cosmos, no creative stream of consciousness; the universe and the mind would be reduced to static photographs of themselves, timeless and boring. This inevitable contradiction is a fundamental pillar in the architecture of reality. Such ontological paradox is what makes it possible to identify entities in a world of pervasive change, as well as for the products of constant change to last after having been created. We must welcome this paradoxical situation as a universal characteristic of existence, indeed as a metaphysical blessing.

Sometimes the present that emerges brings with itself a new ecstasy, a kind that is in contrast with the Proustian reliving of a rapturous past. There is an element of melancholy in reliving good memories; there is no melancholy in a present exhilaration that owes its existence to an inspired exertion. During such an act of inspiration it is eminently clear that reality is the locus of the present rather than the present the locus of reality. This example of an inspired action shows indeed that it is the essential insertion of the present into reality that makes ecstasies of the present possible, that lets the past be substantially changed, a past that therefore has no possible finality, and further, that lets the stepping stones of future achievements be laid down now.

3. *The Present is Always Filled*

Even if one chooses to be detached from some aspects of reality, to live in the present implies to be engaged with actuality. However, this engagement does not involve being continually aware of the entirety of what happens to us now. Mead said that we are "unable to reveal all that is involved in any present";[11] this is so not only because each present has no discernible beginning or end, but also because the complexity of the reality in which the present remains inserted is inexhaustible. The fact is that every present breaks down into a vast, infinite interpresent, a vast, infinite network of presences, each enjoying its own duration, a place where past and future dwell, lest they have no existence at all. The present is not even a pure present!

It is, of course, difficult to remove ourselves mentally from the conception of time as a one-dimensional line of point-like instants, a deceiving cosmological extrapolation of the Euclidean line in geometry. But this universal prejudice we must transcend if we are ever going to apprehend the concrete nature of time. This prejudice is none other than one more example of how readily we are to be

satisfied with blatant abstractions as though they were the complete picture of reality. In order to persuade the reader of how pervasive this kind of prejudice really is, let us list the following additional examples namely: (i) All too often we allow an outstanding memory of a past event to erase all other recollections of the same event, which henceforth we fully identify with the characteristics of what we remember. (ii) The image we have formed of a given person is taken to be the true picture of the real person. (iii) Scientists are also far from being immune to falling into the kind of fallacy we are discussing: a physicist once commented to Werner Heisenberg that "space is simply the place of operations," taking a theoretical construct as fully representing the real space. To this remark Heisenberg replied: "Nonsense, space is blue and birds fly through it"[12] – a sane rejoinder indeed. Even though, on reflection, it is obviously erroneous to judge on the basis of such abstract simplifications, we do continue to think in such simplistic ways. In fact, we are satisfied thinking that the present is a point in time, empty as a consequence, because a point can have no parts; a selective memory of a past fact reflects the fact in its entirety; a "bad" image of a person gives us the whole person; a physical aspect of the world is what a fitting theory makes of it. The danger of these and other similar errors of thought resides in how negatively they affect the breadth and acuteness of our perception, and, in the end, the conception of reality with which we function consciously or subconsciously.

The present, then, is never empty. It cannot be, even if boredom and similar states of mind occasionally make us think so. Some presents do not start anything new, of course; they are merely passive unions of past and future. However, such passive coalescences may generate new associations, become indirectly a prime mover despite their lack of any other kind of innovation. The inertia of the past combined with the accessibility of the future can generate by themselves a forceful action at a given moment. But generally, even when what happens now creatively dominates the situation, that kind of blending is still a factor that helps to fill the present continually. Indeed, the present is always filled.

4. *Action is a prime locus of the present*

The whole of reality is the locus of the present, but the real action that takes place now is especially so. Action can be inertial, the predictable result of a past prime mover, or it can be creative, the

unpredictable outburst of an emergent origination. Without the latter there would be no uniqueness, no novelty, only a ghastly sameness lasting forever. Creative action is usually how creativity manifests itself, be the action physical or mental. From the position that an atomic particle actually takes from a hazy spectrum of possibilities to an act of personal inspiration, creativity generally appears wrapped in the form of action. The cosmos and the mind are constantly visited by creative bursts, quantum leaps into the unknown, which makes of both, cosmos and mind, sites of wonder, at turns delightful and frightening. These outbursts of creativity are what profoundly change the meaning of the past. As already hinted, the past is not independent of the present: what happened yesterday can be totally impacted by what today brings about creatively. And since there is neither a nearest past nor a nearest future to the actual present, no immediate contiguity of acts, the creative aim of the present keeps leaping over intervals of time, back and forth, making it impossible to live the present without going beyond it at the same time. This merely reflects the indetermination generated by the impossibility of strictly localizing any action in space. An action spreads inevitably into a concomitant action at a distance. This nonlocality of actions, the fact that actions are ubiquitous in space as well as in time, is one of the fundamental marks of concreteness, and carries with it the impossibility of finitely localizing the present. A Marcel Proust bent on pursuing a search of the present could describe accurately in deep detail this predicament of ours; through vivid streams of consciousness he could portray how the present emerges, how life is lived present after present, how, in fact, acts create time.

5. *Energy is the ultimate source of the present*

Because action produces an immediate field of effects, every action clearly detects the presence of an underlying energy. Indeed, there is no action without energy to draw from, hence no time without energy from which to emerge. Energy, though, is not directly observable; it is detectable only indirectly through action. Even the word "energy" itself has a more or less hazy meaning. No definition of energy, either taken from physics or any other discipline, is really satisfactory, relying as they all are on either circular characterizations or on examples – something that, in fact, is true of any attempt to define any basic category.

Energy is introduced in textbooks by referring to its effects on other entities, in both physical and mental situations. The nature of energy itself is never truly captured in words. As with any concrete entity, only an infinite sentence could begin to approach its infinite content.

We have learned from physics that mass is really one form of energy, the latter being the more fundamental entity of the two, and also that energy is always embedded in large dynamical systems. Whether energy can be considered a substance or not is really a matter of how substance is defined; regardless, energy does have effects on many substances within its reach. Nothing in absolute isolation could be reached by energy. Energy is an entity-in-relation, a relativistic aspect of reality, never a mere property of physical objects or minds. It is within the overall configuration of a related system of entities that energy instigates new events.

The insurmountable difficulty one encounters when trying to thoroughly define or characterize energy should not be a surprise at all. As we said, such is also the case with any fundamental concept we use in our thoughts. Even in mathematics, the most explicit of languages, no basic primitive idea can be defined directly: it can only be introduced indirectly through principles, axioms, or postulates in which they appear. Moreover, its meaning can be only partially grasped when interpreted in suitable models that satisfy the principles, axioms, or postulates. Since an infinite number of such models can usually be offered, we can never say that we have really captured the complete meaning of any primitive idea. We can only elucidate a basic category partially through specific applications. In connection with energy, let us look at one particular example outside the field of physics. Nagarjuna distinguished energy from zest and vigilance. His psychological characterization is encapsulated in this analogy: "Zest is comparable to a person who, at the point of departure, makes an initial decision to go. Energy is comparable to a person who, once on the march, does not stop. Vigilance is comparable to a person who persists so that his stride never slackens."[13] Energy in this model is, then, what once on the march makes us keep going. There would be no steadfastness without the "virtue of energy," as it is called in Buddhism. We feel we understand in part what energy is through examples like this, although we do perceive that no single exemplification can exhaust the whole semantic content of the word "energy."

Principles and axioms, then, can be characterized as linguistic expressions leading to unlimited reservoirs of examples, applications,

and models, each providing a different intuition of the concepts involved, a different "spread of thought," each bringing a new illumination, a new way to grasp the concepts. Even though each concept cannot be circumscribed completely, we do recognize its semantic presence in every one of its pertinent embodiments. This infinitude of content is implicit in any course of thought, in the meaning of any theory: it is simply an inevitable fact of rational cogitation. As we pierce the meaning of a concept with examples, we cannot help but be aware of the existence of a limitless semantic landscape that extends beyond what our finite mind can ever hope to apprehend fully.

Now, in physics one distinguishes between actual and potential energy; that is, the energy exerted at the moment versus the energy in reserve, ready to be actualized eventually by special interventions. Potential energy may originate in past acts or in delayed objectives. We shelved work that we knew we had to go back to eventually in order to finish it properly. We badly desire to start a project that obstacles prevent us from pursuing; the frustrated desire possesses, embedded in its memory, potential energies that we may be able to actualize, to set in action under suitable circumstances. However, energy is enacted now or not at all. We search into the present to use the energies embedded in its midst: its own, or alien ones that the present allows into itself. Action is the outward appearance of effectively applied energy. Clearly, energy is the opposite of an ideal essence. Energy is real and effective, while essences are only abstractions extracted from the real, aspects of the real whose reality vanishes as soon as the real vanishes. There is no heaven of essences waiting to be tapped. There is instead a huge reservoir of energies, potential or actual, stretched both spatially and temporally throughout the universe as well as inwardly in every corner of our mind. On these energies we rely, and our personal energy is only part of the universal spread. Wisdom is a discerning way to direct energies fruitfully, to know when, how, and in what directions to push and pull productively here and there, with the knowledge that small interventions can grow up to, lead to huge consequences: we deflect the path of a movement slightly, and this small investment of energy may usher monumental results in the long run, the art of deflection being like a magician's touch to put energy to good and efficient use.

We should, then, look at the present in search of all the throbbing energy it contains. And when we see the present as the interpresent

that it is, then we find the presence of not one but several crisscrossing currents of flowing energy, sometimes convergent to a harmonious synthesis of actions, sometimes clashing in conflict with one another. In the latter case, we cannot help but become engulfed by the whirlwind of contrasting tendencies in motion that force us to act in contrary ways simultaneously. Despite the deceptive prejudice of centuries against *all* contradictions, such discordant engagement into opposite actions may be highly fruitful. Often, by avoiding the subsumption of contradictory trends into a single abstract and sterile unity, by keeping alive the antinomies, one can productively revel in the energy that such antinomies generate. In effect, this happens more commonly than one might think. Now, these various currents of energy of the interpresent may contain a push from the past or a pull from the future, or just emerge and spend themselves in a short flash without displaying any temporal direction. Whatever their dynamic character, though, they now all interact together at once.

Strong as the memory of a past event or the image of a desired objective may be, they can never match the vividness of present existence, the turgidity of what we are experiencing or doing at the moment. Such vividness and turgidity are so compelling that they cannot be ignored: we are forced to deal with them in some way. The superior urgency of the present makes the past and the future unclear; its irresistible forcefulness engages us with the world at hand, whether we like it or not. Even in a state of boredom, dejection, or despair it is impossible for us to set aside the present. The colors, the smells, the sounds, the tactile textures that surround us, our own sense of life, the pain or pleasure we are experiencing, all together erect a real dwelling whose concreteness is overpowering.

Because the present is one of the faces of energy, the time when paths can actually be opened is now. This is also the time when choices from any ramification of possible actions can effectively be made. Each present is many presents: its consequences branch constantly; indeed, at each moment we live many lives. All this is eminently clear during creative activities. An artist, a writer, a composer, for example, are oblivious of time while they work: when they are "living in the present," choosing, they *are* the present in all its many-sidedness. This is true also during any intense, involving exertion, a process where

energy shines as the ultimate primitive entity that sustains any person's existence.

6. *Energy may come out of bareness*

That energy is not itself directly observable is a fact of physics. But this does not mean that energy is in any way ghostly or necessarily in the background. It may come to the fore unmistakably, especially when its presence emerges out of the barest forms of existence. In connection with this type of emergence, Buddhism claims that "an inexhaustible mine of energy obtains just because of the emptiness of things."[14] The word "emptiness" employed in this citation and elsewhere in Buddhist texts as a translation of the Sanskrit *sunyata* is highly misleading. It is used essentially as a tool to cleanse the mind of misconceptions and troublesome desires; even writers like Nagarjuna end up by attaching to "emptiness" a wealth of existential attributes and powers. "Emptiness" in Buddhism is more akin to bareness than to nothingness. In effect, ontologically speaking, there is no emptiness; nothingness does not exist. Let us look at this situation more closely, since it involves an important aspect of energy: its ability to surge unaided from bareness itself.

It is well established in cosmology that it is senseless to speak of empty space. The universe is everywhere pervaded by radiation as well as by the presence of many other kinds of physical entities, especially fields, all of which can hardly be considered "nothing." The most fundamental reason why there is no empty space anywhere is because space – just as time – is a property of reality, which makes of empty space an ontological impossibility. Neither space nor time can ever be void of existence because both of them are aspects of existence. "Emptiness" can only have a very relative meaning, be that in physics or in Buddhism. Nagarjuna, Chandrakirti, etc., were struggling to express a difficult concept for which every other word seemed inadequate. To them, "emptiness" was an operational term, used to empty the mind of superfluous, distracting contents, not to refer to an ontological vacuum as the ultimate residue of any kind of purifying analysis. What one finds inevitably after a systematic "cleansing" of consciousness, or after any exhaustive physical analysis by elimination, is bare existence, not identifiable "atoms" of any kind, but a pure spreading field of reality in which mutual, dependent origination of actual entities rules, an *absolute relativity* of creation. No eternal objects, no isolated items, but omnipresent waves and spreading fields and entities, entities with multiple location,

nonlocal in the sense that their place in the cosmos cannot possibly be truly circumscribed. In part and whole, reality is ubiquitous and has no room for absolute emptiness: the interpenetration of actualities fills the remotest corners of cosmos and mind with each and every one of such actualities.

Bareness, then, is not nothingness; it is a state of existence. To make this fully clear in connection with Buddhism, let us quote Stcherbatsky. He says: "We can translate the word *sunya* by relative or contingent, and the term *sunyata* by relativity or contingency. This is better than to translate it by 'void.' The term *sunya* is in Mahayana a synonym of dependent existence and means not something void, but something 'devoid' of independent reality, with the implication that nothing short of the whole possesses independent reality, and with the further implication that the whole forbids every formulation by concept or speech, since they can only bifurcate reality and never directly seize it – this is attested by an overwhelming mass of evidence in all the Mahayana literature. That this term never meant a mathematical void or simple nonexistence is most emphatically insisted upon. Those who suppose that *sunya* means void are declared to have misunderstood the term, they have not understood the purpose for which the term has been introduced. 'We are relativists, we are not negativists,' insists Chandrakirti."[15]

Now, to speak of dependent existence and interpenetration of entities seems to point to a monism of actuality: if everything is related to everything else, then all reduces necessarily to one single object – a false conclusion! For lack of a better term, Stcherbatsky and Obermiller refer to what they call "Buddhist monism." But "monism" is a misleading word in reference to Buddhism, or to any theory that basically puts relations as being genetically prior to terms. Just as "emptiness" really points to dependent existences, the presumed "monism" of Buddhism points to a *pluralism* of entities in which each entity's extension covers the whole that contains the entity. In both world and mind each distinguishable entity branches out to reach and overlap anything within its range. There is nothing extraordinarily transcendent or startling in this assertion: rather, it conveys a routine matter of fact. A regular example of this is that of a physical field of forces, a concept with far-reaching implications not sufficiently exploited outside of physics. Michael Faraday, who introduced the notion of field of forces in physics, arrived at the following natural conclusion: "Each atom extends, so to say, throughout the whole of the solar system, yet always retaining its

own center of force."[16] This is not a claim for a monistic system of all atoms, a fusion of all of them into one single physical being; on the contrary, it points to an overall pluralism of entities, each a center of forces, each covering the whole cosmos in an especially ordered perspective. Another regular example is the one of physiology: each organ is the center of a special physiological function that extends over the whole organism, *is* the whole organism in a singular functional perspective. As for time, we can say that each present also extends "beyond itself," that is, beyond any limited location that one can assign to it on a first approximation. Time exists, but just as with the two previous examples, it has multiple location: each distinguishable moment stretches to past and future moments to absorb them all as components placed in a singular order.

Looking attentively then into what energy is ultimately, we find ourselves often face to face with some form of bare existence from which energy emerges, a bare existence which, by virtue of the universal co-dependence of all the parts in which it can be imperfectly sliced, is fundamentally unlimited. Bare existence is the entire mass of reality devoid of any specific configuration generated by physical forces or mental conceptions. Existence begins in a state of bareness, and preserves this bare condition underneath even after it either shapes itself or is being shaped by forces created by distinguishable entities as these emerge in its midst. This condition of bareness never disappears entirely, no matter how events hide it from our perception. Often, when energy begins to work suddenly at a given moment and we can find no explanation for such surge, it is a mass of bare existence whose transformation accounts for the presence of such working energy. There is nothing metaphysically recondite about this last statement: it is a routine fact that differentiated events come to the fore as a condensation of a relatively undifferentiated mass of reality. The absolute relativity of things requires that every event be placed in a diffuse background, a background that, carefully analysed, reveals an undisguised bareness underneath. This is bareness, not nothingness – an extension of unhinged existence ready to articulate itself in an unlimited number of different ways. Leibniz's famous query, "Why is there something rather than nothing?" implies that the existence of something preempts the existence of nothing. But if the cosmos is a plenum of existence without empty cleavages or gaps, it must, then, steadily retain for itself the condition of bareness as a necessary factor with which to make possible the constant partition of reality into distinguishable sequences of related occurrences – distinguishable, not fully separable, for nothing is ever

fully segregated from the naked substratum of being from which everything evolves.

7. *The present has stages*

Every action has stages: a prelude, the exertion, a postlude. Like every seemingly instantaneous event, there is usually an incubation, a delivery, and a lyses. Ordinarily we act moved by memories, or pulled perhaps by a "nostalgia for the future," even when we think that our acts are pure impromptus. The truth is that we must reckon with action as a process with stages. Just like the present itself, these stages have no boundaries; they are linked by zones of transition that play the role of diffuse connecting regions: no line boundaries, no sharp barriers, ever. All the stages of an action may be included in the act's present, and each plays a different role in it. They are identifiable but not fully separable. For example, there is no instantaneous act of will; even the most abrupt decision breaks down into: (i) a wish, (ii) an effective preparation that, even if briefly, induces and makes up the potential execution, (iii) the decision itself, identifiable but not capable of being truly isolated, and (iv) the postlude, the beginning of the decision's consequences. The same is the case with an act of thought, even if it appears to be a sudden revelation in the middle of a "dark night of the soul." Such act breaks down into: (i) a brief period of questioning without an answer, (ii) the rise of the conception itself, and (iii) the thought's aftermath. Such is the case also with an act of love, as well as with purely physical actions. All these various kinds of stages are part of the respective presents into which they inject themselves.

In turn, each stage may have its own stages, be they physical or mental in nature, each consisting in gradual changes in fundamental characteristics. For example, (i) all stages of the present have a temporal direction that may switch from forward to backward, thus creating substages within the given stage. (ii) The strength with which reality holds on to the present of a given act can, within a particular stage, increase or weaken, thus producing contrasting phases – again, new stages within a stage. (iii) The specific effectiveness with which reality operates into each of the present's stages is also not necessarily uniform; it can generate by itself stages within stages. There are innumerable examples of this successive articulation into parts of parts in the realm of subatomic physics. To make clear that there is nothing unusual in such gradual partition of reality, let us think of a typical example from our conscious life.

Very often we act mechanically, out of duty, going through the motions, so to speak, then, in the course of the act – be that in the preparation, in the execution, or in the aftereffects as we look back – we become suddenly or gradually engaged in the act, internally involved with it. This transition evidently breaks the act's stage into two substages. We experience such kind of mental transition as a natural matter of course, and we seldom think much about it. Clearly, each stage can reach its own kind of relative plenitude, its own way of peaking and then of connecting with other peaks. Stages may come and go fleetingly, but always add to the complex structure of the present. This is obvious in any basic transient physiological act: a heartbeat, inhaling, tasting, lifting an arm, touching – as physiologists well know, these are by no means simple events: in each of them there are many minuscule subacts, as well as changes of direction and degrees of fulfillment. The act's stages make of the present a little universe in itself, a microcosmos, a peak of reality dressed as a now whose spurious appearance of unity hides its multiple interpresent.

Not to see the present the way we have described it would make of causality a supreme mystery. Were the present to be the independent point-like abstraction we learned to think of from time immemorial, cause and effect would be impossible. The present would be void of content, the past could not interact with the present or the present with the future. In fact, it would make no sense to talk about the present's direction. Will would be unthinkable. Wishes could not create attitudes, and deliberation could not end up in decisions: the stages that lead to the act of will must be co-present with the resolution to make it happen. In general, gropings for orientation, or reversals of direction, would be beyond the bounds of possibility. It is the past in the present that creates material cause, and it is the future in the present that creates final cause.

We wish to emphasize that the preceding analyses apply to the most exclusively physical events and situations as well. Consider an inert object in motion, a falling stone, say. Its direction is gravitationally imposed. The stone is steadily subject to constant forces of attraction. The stone's acceleration at a given moment contains and reflects all the previous stages of the fall, at the same time that the direction of the fall is continually affected by other concurrent events, clashes with other stones, etc. Thinking along the lines of Michael Faraday, we can say that the rest of the universe – past and future – has a specific hold on each stage of the moving

stone; it is part of the stone's cosmological constitution. We are, then, a far cry from conceiving the fall of the stone as a mere continuous sequence of instantaneous positions. Because each stage of the fall contains the memory of all the previous pushing stages as well as the pulling of forthcoming destinations, it is, then, a monumental mistake to see the fall of a stone as a simple descent along a one-dimensional line. In fact, the physical universe would stop fully if, in this as well as in any other physical process, the previous and following phases were not a part in each stage of the process, no matter how brief the stage. There would be no consummation, not even a single tendency.

We have described changing entities and events, both mental and physical, as exhibiting under careful analysis a rather intricate temporal organization. The same can be observed in something as intangible as a point of view, both physical or mental. Although a point of view is not a solid entity, it does have an undeniable reality. A mental viewpoint is the overall frame of mind of the self at a given moment – clearly, a changeable reality. In cosmology, the reality of each point of view, each moving center of reference, plays a most fundamental role in relativity theory, according to which no center of reference can be taken as absolute in any way, nor can its overall view of the cosmos be taken as complete: a "complete" view would need all the other concomitant views to make up what is, in effect, the truly infinite multiplicity of perspectives that together constitute moment to moment our plural universe – the multiverse in which we exist.

As a consequence of what we have just said, each viewpoint cannot be seen at all as a kind of mathematical point without dimension, be that in the mind or in the world. Rather than a point in time or in space, viewpoints extend indefinitely and cover the whole of consciousness and the world. As far as the mind is concerned, points of view provide the energy to apprehend internal and external entities in a given prefigured order. To judge means to activate a point of view, which implies engaging the mind into an actual duration, organizing our perception along specific lines and into specific frames. Viewpoints lead to extended, unique ways of grasping reality; as such, they generate lasting attitudes and represent specific mental ways of looking at anything. They create priorities, and by so doing they relegate some aspects of mind and world to oblivion. A productive conversation is a counterpoint of viewpoints, be they in agreement

or in opposition. Social conflict is an intersection of presents with points of view at variance with one another. In addition, we have a viewpoint that is totally in focus as long as it lasts, or hazy and then capable of fully adjusting to aspects of reality that are intrinsically diffuse. Exact apprehension is not necessarily sharply delineated: an essentially vague fact calls for a hazy apprehension in order to be captured with a reasonable degree of adequacy.

Let us stop our semantic investigation here, aware that the search for the present has not been completed – as could well have been expected, since such is the case with the comprehension of any concrete matter of fact. We do hope, however, to have made clear that our ancestral prejudices regarding the matters here discussed cannot possibly give us anything but the most superficial approximations.

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