

This is a post-peer-review, pre-copyedit version of an article published in *Journal of Ethics*. The final authenticated version is available online at: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10892-021-09372-4>

Please cite published version.

Life and Death Without the Present

Daniel Story,

California Polytechnic State University

San Luis Obispo, CA

March 30, 2021

Abstract: In this paper, I explore the connection between certain metaphysical views of time and emotional attitudes concerning one's own death and mortality. I argue that one metaphysical view of time, B-theory, offers consolation to mortals in the face of death relative to commonsense and another metaphysical view of time, A-theory. Consolation comes from three places. First, B-theory implies that time does not really pass, and as a result one has less reason to worry about one's time growing short. Second, B-theory entails that there is a real sense in which one's death does not result in one's annihilation, and this fact can temper feelings of existential distress. Third, B-theory has the consequence that the benefits one has lost (or will lose) have concrete existence, and this fact can mitigate the emotional significance of the losses of death.

'It was'—that is the name of the will's gnashing of teeth and most secret melancholy.
—Friedrich Nietzsche¹

Section 1: Introduction

One of the distinctive features of human life is that it ends. Sooner or later, we all have to grapple with the fact that we will die. Being dead is not painful or boring or wearisome. When death comes, we will not be around to appreciate it. Nevertheless, it seems obvious to many that we have reason to lament or feel similar negative emotions about our own deaths.²

The bundle of emotions people tend to feel about death is complex and varies over time. One source of negative emotions is the connection between death and deprivation. Many philosophers believe that death is bad when and because death deprives the dier of good things

¹ Nietzsche (1995 p. 139)

² In this paper, I ignore the possibility that there might be life after death and the possibility that human life might continue forever.

(e.g. Nagel 1970, McMahan 1988, Feldman 1991, Bradley 2009). An axiological belief of this kind is part of what makes death seem lamentable, as we tend to lament deprivations that we believe are bad. A second source of negative emotions is the thought of, as Philip Larkin puts it:

...the total emptiness for ever,
The sure extinction that we travel to
And shall be lost in always. (2012)

The thought of future annihilation is distressing, partly because it cannot easily be incorporated into our egocentric frame of reference (Nagel 1986 pp. 223-231, Scheffler 2016 Ch. 3)³ and partly because most of us simply do not want to be annihilated.⁴ A third source of negative emotions is the sense that time is growing short. Sometimes when I am having a good experience, for example when I am eating something delicious, I find myself lamenting that I only have a little time left to enjoy that experience. This feeling is analogous to the unease people sometimes feel as they get older. They begin to lament more and more the fact that they have less and less time to live, even before they are in mortal danger.

In this paper, I argue that accepting and reflecting on a certain popular metaphysical view about time, which I call 'Standard B-theory,' can rationally change the way that one thinks about one's death. Reflecting on Standard B-theory can rationally soften the blow of one's mortality because it (i) implies that one's time does not really grow short, (ii) implies that in a real sense one is not annihilated by death, and (iii) implies that all the benefits one has previously received have concrete existence.

I proceed as follows. In Section 2, I introduce Standard B-theory, briefly charting some of the ways it departs from commonsense and competing metaphysical views. In Section 3, I present my arguments for the claim that Standard B-theory can be consoling in the face of one's mortality. In Section 4, I consider some important objections and conclude.

Section 2: Standard B-Theory

Time is one of those things that feels simultaneously familiar and deeply mysterious.⁵ Most everyone can sense that time is weird. Nevertheless, we manage to get along fine with

³ This explanation jibes with the Buddhist contention that one can reduce existential suffering by adopting the doctrine of non-self and thereby dismantling this egocentric frame of reference (see Siderits 2007 ch. 4).

⁴ Some philosophers argue that death is bad partly because it annihilates the dier (Kamm 1993 pp. 19, 49-53; Benatar 2017 Ch. 5; cf. Blatti 2012). But it is not clear that one has to believe this (rather intuitive) axiological claim to find one's annihilation lamentable and distressing.

⁵ This feeling was felt long before contemporary physics revealed the radical limitations of folk physics. See, for example, Augustine's discussion of time in his confessions (2008 XI.17).

some commonsensical notions about it. Commonsense says that time passes and that we move through it as it passes, wholly present at each moment we exist. The present is where all the action's at, while the past and future have an insubstantial quality: the past is hazy and quiescent; the future open and unwritten.

Philosophical debate about the nature of time has been dominated in the last century by two competing views: A-theory and B-theory.⁶ A-theory more or less aligns with commonsense. According to A-theory, time passes. Times (e.g. 1908; the day you were born) objectively have tense properties like presentness, pastness, or futurity (called 'A-properties'). And the present is metaphysically special. A-theorists disagree amongst themselves about the ontological status of the past and future. For now, I am going to focus on one version of A-theory, *presentism*, according to which only present things exist (I discuss other versions in Section 4). Like commonsense, presentists say that we move through time as it passes and are wholly present at each moment we exist, i.e. we *endure* through time.

In contrast, B-theory departs significantly from commonsense. B-theory denies that A-properties objectively apply to times. Rather, times only have A-properties relative to perspectives. The most we can objectively say is that some times are earlier than, later than, or simultaneous with others. This means that all times are equally real, and none of them are metaphysically special. B-theory is closely associated with several other ideas, which many B-theorists accept. I will use the title 'Standard B-theory' to refer to this package of associated ideas. For one, Standard B-theory denies that time really passes.⁷ Furthermore, Standard B-theory says that objects that persist through time are not wholly present at each moment they exist. Instead, they are stretched through time like roads are stretched through space. On this view, you are a spacetime worm with both spatial and temporal parts (e.g. a part that is turning five, a part that is experiencing your first kiss). You persist through time in virtue of having temporal parts located at different times. And all your temporal parts are just as real from a tenseless, objective perspective as the one reading this paper. Those other temporal parts are just not here, now.⁸

Let us consider the connection between these views about time and our attitudes towards death. Commonsense says that our time gets ever shorter and the end ever nearer as we move through time. This very flesh that presently is aged and weary was once youthful and

⁶ These terms were introduced by McTaggart (1908)

⁷ Some B-theorists think that time passes (e.g. Deng (2013), Leininger (2013)), but this is a minority position.

⁸ This view about objects is not entailed by B-theory (see Sider (2001) for discussion). I consider a variation on this view in footnote 14.

healthy. In the near future it will be rotting in the ground. And once we die, we unequivocally and permanently cease to exist. Presentism agrees with this assessment.⁹

Standard B-theory complicates this picture significantly.¹⁰ This is unsurprising, given all the ways that Standard B-theory departs from commonsense and presentism. Robin Le Poidevin (1996) was one of the first contemporary philosophers to argue that B-theory can offer consolation to mortals.¹¹ Le Poidevin argued that B-theory implies that we and the things we care about have a sort of vicarious immortality. For one, since all times are equally real, “it will always be the case” that we lived and did the things we did (1996 p.144). Moreover, since the passage of time is an illusion and all things can be said to tenselessly exist, the apparent transience of everything we value is an illusion; “such things are eternally real” (ibid. p. 146). Hence, Le Poidevin concludes that B-theory can be consoling insofar as what is disconcerting about one’s own mortality is that death and the passage of time threaten to obliterate one’s life and everything one values.

I agree with Le Poidevin. But more needs to be said. For one, as Mikel Burley points out in a critique of Le Poidevin, “eternally real” is ambiguous. On the one hand, something can be eternally real in that it exists at all times. We are not eternally real in this sense. On the other hand, something can be eternally real in that the true propositions about that thing are true at all times. We are eternally real in this sense, according to Standard B-theory. But this does not give us reason to change our views about death. For what we mainly care about when we think about our death is the annihilation of ourselves, not the annihilation of true propositions. And at times after death, we have been annihilated (Burley 2008a). This critique suggests we need to clarify the relevant sense in which, according to Standard B-theory, one’s life and everything one values are eternally real.

⁹ There are a few complications here, which I am going to ignore for ease of exposition. One complication is that we sometimes talk as if we sometimes continue to exist as a corpse for a while after death. This position has been endorsed by some philosophers who do not believe we are essentially persons (e.g. Belshaw 2009). I assume that annihilation and death always coincide, but this assumption is not load-bearing. What matters for my purposes is that (i) one’s personhood, which is what we mainly care about, is always annihilated by death (if not before) and (ii) death is at least closely associated with one’s total annihilation. A second complication is that commonsense may depart from presentism in certain contexts. For instance, popular time travel narratives seem to presuppose that traveling to the past amounts to going to a real place rather than committing suicide. Although I assume that commonsense and presentism align, I will address other A-theoretic views below.

¹⁰ Even if they did not discuss A-theory and B-theory as such, many thinkers have explored the ways in which our commonsense attitudes towards death are dependent upon the presumption that A-properties are objective features of times. For example, Einstein (1972 p. 538), Hesse (1995 pp. 87-88), and Vonnegut (1969).

¹¹ See also Leslie (2007), especially pp. 60-61.

Furthermore, there is more to the story about why Standard B-theory offers consolation than Le Poidevin lets on. For there are several distinct ways the tenets of Standard B-theory can bear on our emotional lives, which need to be disentangled. In the next section, I argue that Standard B-theory can affect our attitudes towards death in three distinct ways. First, when one realizes that time does not really pass, one has less reason to worry about time growing short. Second, one can take comfort in that there is a real sense in which one's death does not result in one's annihilation. Third, the emotional significance of death's losses may be tempered by reflecting on the concrete existence of the benefits one has lost (or will lose).

Section 3: The Consolation of Standard B-theory

First, let us talk about time growing short. On a commonsensical and presentist way of thinking about time and the self, the realization that one has finite time and the realization that one's time is always growing shorter are inexorably intertwined. I am at each passing moment moving through my finite time, and thus the end is always getting closer. Despite being intertwined, however, these separate realizations do not affect us in the same way. It is just as much true at twenty as it is at seventy that I am a finite creature whose projects, relationships, and experiences will one day come to an end. On the face of it, then, the bare fact of my finitude is not something about which I have much more reason to lament at one age rather than another.¹² But the fact that my time is always growing shorter is something I have more reason to worry about at seventy than twenty, because at seventy I have used up most of what I have left, while at twenty I still have much to go. And my finitude, tied up as it is with my time's growing short, looms larger as death approaches and lays greater and greater claim to my concern.

Standard B-theory pries these two ideas apart because if time does not pass, then there is no important sense in which time can grow shorter. Remember that Standard B-theorists want to say that objects are stretched through time and have temporal parts. When they think about themselves or use the word 'I', Standard B-theorists refer to the whole spacetime worm of which the referring temporal part is a part. And the time allotted to a person, conceived of as a spacetime worm, does not grow shorter or longer. For instance, it is an eternally real fact that McTaggart spans fifty-eight years, just as much true the day McTaggart was born as the day he died.¹³ So, there is no reason for Standard B-theorists to lament that their time is growing short.

¹² One might object to this by pointing out that at seventy I will probably have more meaningful projects and relationships that will be cut short by my death. This is true, but I may have many such projects and relationships at twenty as well. Moreover, I have many projects and relationships at twenty that I can predict will be cut short by other events: the deaths of others, the vagaries of life, etc. So, on the whole, I do not think we have much more reason to lament our finitude at seventy than at twenty.

¹³ McTaggart could intelligibly lament the fact that he only spans fifty-eight years, but this would not be the same as lamenting that his time is growing short. The former is something that he

One might object as follows. When a Standard B-theorist laments that her time is growing short, this is roughly equivalent to lamenting that she is now (i.e. at a time simultaneous with the lamentation) closer to the end of her life than she was at earlier times in her life. And since the time at which the Standard B-theorist laments is closer to the time at which she will die than all earlier times, the Standard B-theorist can intelligibly and reasonably lament that her time is growing short.

I agree that it would be intelligible for a Standard B-theorist to lament that she is now closer to the end of her life than she was at an earlier time. But I do not think this is either clearly reasonable or roughly equivalent to lamenting that one's time is growing short. The sentiment that one's time is growing short is essentially tied up with an enduring conception of the self. If one is an enduring self and one is now near the end of one's life, then it follows that one does not have much time to live. But in reflective moments, the Standard B-theorist thinks of herself as a spacetime worm. And if she is a worm, it does not follow from the fact that she is now near the end of her life that she does not have much time to live. All that follows is that she does not *at such-and-such time* have much time to live. There are two reasons why the qualification matters. First, from the perspective of a spacetime worm, it is unclear why this last fact should be of any special importance. After all, while at such-and-such time the Standard B-theorist does not have much time to live, at many earlier times she does. The problem is that someone in this frame of mind cannot think of herself as concentrated in any particular moment. Second, and related to this, it seems that the fact under consideration could have significance for the Standard B-theorist at any time in her life, assuming she knows about it and is taking the worm perspective. Yet the supposed fact that one's time is growing short is something that would only be significant at the end of one's life. These considerations show, I think, that so long as one is taking the perspective of a spacetime worm, lamenting that one is now near the end of one's life is neither clearly reasonable nor roughly equivalent to lamenting that one's time is growing short.¹⁴

could lament at any age (supposing he knew about it), but the latter is something he would only have reason to lament near the end of his life.

¹⁴ Not all B-theorists think 'I' refers to a spacetime worm. Some, like David Velleman, believe that the self and the referent of 'I' is a momentary subject, i.e. a temporal part of a spacetime worm that is connected to past and future selves by mental states with first-personal content or modes of presentation (Velleman 1996). These B-theorists should not be worried about time growing short either. As Velleman notes, if I am a momentary subject, then my time is not growing short, for, as he puts it, "I am *of the moment*." The future is "bearing down on me" and the past "slipping away" only in the sense that I, the self eternally located at this time, am connected to earlier and later selves by memory and anticipation (Velleman 2006 pp. 18-20; see also Velleman 2020 Ch. 3). Admittedly, I (the momentary subject) can perhaps intelligibly lament that I am near the end of a spacetime worm rather than the beginning. But this is not a changing fact about me, while the fact that my time is growing short is supposed to be a changing fact about me. Furthermore, my being located near the end of the life of which I am a part has no bearing on how much time

Hence, when one is in a Standard B-theoretic frame of mind, one has no good reason (or at least *less* reason) to be concerned about time growing short. This, then, is the first reason that Standard B-theory offers some consolation to mortals.

The second and third reasons have to do with what Standard B-theory implies about the status of the subjectively conceived past and future. Recall that commonsense and presentism hold that the present is very special. Death--an exit from the present--brings utter annihilation. McTaggart, along with his relationships, loved ones, projects, and experiences have ceased to be part of the universe. And McTaggart's fate awaits us all. Someday, you too will exit the stage, and that marks the end of your existence, in every sense of the word. Thus, a presentist (or an adherent to commonsense) can lament that he and his meaningful relationships, his best experiences, and his important projects soon will be (or already have been) utterly obliterated. After his death, these things will no longer in any sense be part of the universe.

Things are different for the Standard B-theorist. Standard B-theory implies that there is no deep metaphysical distinction between past, present, and future. Hence, facts about when one exists are merely locational facts that have no deep metaphysical implications.¹⁵ This metaphysical position has consequences for emotions relating to personal annihilation and deprivation.

First, let us consider personal annihilation. We have already noted that the thought of one's future nonexistence can be distressing. But according to Standard B-theory, there is a real sense in which if one is ever in the world, one is in it for good. For the world is a four-dimensional thing. When a Standard B-theorist thinks of the time after her death, she must acknowledge that she will not be *there*. Yet *there* is not (and will not be) the same as the world. *There* is merely a part of the same spatiotemporal manifold that she now occupies. This acknowledgement can be comforting because not existing in the future is a bit more like not now being in Los Angeles or London and a bit less like being utterly annihilated than commonsense and presentism suggest. And while one can feel various negative emotions for various reasons about not now being in Los Angeles or London, the sorts of negative emotions that one is likely to feel about not now being in a particular place differ significantly in intensity and quality from emotions like existential distress. The thought of not being in Los Angeles now (or ever) is just not usually disturbing in the

I have, because regardless of where I am located, I exist for only a moment. All this suggests that on the assumption that 'I' refers to a momentary subject, lamenting one's location in a spacetime worm is neither roughly equivalent to lamenting that one's time is growing short nor clearly reasonable.

¹⁵ Differences in spatiotemporal location are associated with countless other sorts of differences, of course. For instance, people visiting Rome in 63 BCE were more likely to bump into Cicero on the street than people visiting in 63 CE (since Cicero was dead by then). But generally these are metaphysically shallow differences, which are analogous to the differences associated with differences in spatial location.

same way that the thought of not being in the world at all usually is. Hence, the possibility of comfort. This comfort depends upon our being “eternally real” in the sense that from a certain objective perspective—namely, the tenseless one—we are not utterly obliterated by death as appearances would suggest.¹⁶

Second, let us consider how B-theory might affect one's emotional attitudes towards some of the deprivations of death. Of the three arguments presented in this section, I am least confident in this one. Thus, the following is offered in a relatively tentative and exploratory spirit.

An event deprives one of something when it prevents one from receiving some benefit one would have otherwise received. Loss—the deprivation of benefits one has previously received—is an important and particularly distressing type of deprivation. Sometimes losses are particularly distressing because they will cause one to feel unpleasant feelings like grief. The losses associated with one's own death are not distressing for this reason, since one will not experience anything after death (Brueckner and Fischer 1985 pp. 217-218). Still, this does not prevent the losses of death from being particularly distressing in prospect. Losses are often prospectively distressing because they will deprive us of things to which we are emotionally attached, things precious to us that we are averse to losing (Draper 1999 pp. 408-413). Similarly, losses are often prospectively distressing because we value our association with the things the losses will deprive us of, and typically we are distressed by the destruction of things we value (Scheffler 2016 pp. 21-22).¹⁷ For instance, many people are distressed by the thought of being permanently deprived of their beloved by death, both because they are emotionally attached to their beloved and because they value their relationship with their beloved. Hence, the losses of death can be particularly distressing in prospect even though we know they will not cause any unpleasant experiences in us.

¹⁶ When discussing Le Poidevin's argument, Natalja Deng argues, as I do, that the comfort B-theory offers *vis-à-vis* existential distress depends upon viewing time in a quasi-spatial way. But Deng thinks that viewing time in this way is only possible if one posits a dimension that relates to time as time relates to space. Thus, Deng argues that to get the result he wants Le Poidevin must posit a second time dimension at which all first-dimensional times exist, where this second time dimension is related to first-dimension time as first-dimension time is related to space. Only then can Le Poidevin, on his deathbed, take comfort that the events and things in his life are quasi-spatially “out there,” at this second-dimension time, in a sort of “totum simul.” Because this is strange and implausible, Deng is ultimately skeptical about Le Poidevin's conclusion (Deng 2015). As should be clear, I reject Deng's requirement. Viewing time in a quasi-spatial way does not require positing a second time dimension. It only requires that we make reference to a tenseless perspective, from which all times can be “seen” as coexisting.

¹⁷ This claim concerning the “conservative dimension” of valuing needs to be properly qualified, as sometimes a thing's being preserved is inconsistent with its continuing to have value (see Shiffrin 2016 p. 144 ff.)

Here is an argument for the conclusion that Standard B-theory can rationally temper the emotional impact of loss for some people. It begins with a case. Suppose you and an intimate friend are both wine connoisseurs who regularly derive great pleasure from imbibing. A highly contagious disease is sweeping the globe, which causes permanent anosmia a few months after infection in everyone except those who have a rare genetic mutation. You and your friend both contract the disease. You learn this. You are very distressed that you will soon lose the ability to enjoy wine. Then you discover that your friend has the rare genetic mutation and will not be stricken with anosmia after all. How would this make you feel? Initially, the discovery might prompt jealousy or resentment. But I suspect that many people would in the long run find that their happiness for their friend tempers their distress about their own loss. For instance, you might find yourself thinking, “Well, at least my friend can go on enjoying wine as before,” and this thought might make you feel a little better about the prospect of your loss than you otherwise would. Moreover, I do not think such a reaction would simply be an instance of one unrelated emotion interfering with another, like when amusement displaces ennui in someone watching a silly television show. Rather, it seems *appropriate* that your friend’s good fortune should temper your distress a little.¹⁸

If this is right, then for some people the emotional impact of loss can in some appropriate way be tempered by the knowledge that someone with whom they are intimately related is able to enjoy the benefits they have lost. And if we accept this claim, then we can see why Standard B-theory can (in some appropriate way) temper the emotional impact of loss, at least for some people. For according to Standard B-theory, there is a real sense—the tenseless sense—in which we are enjoying all the benefits we have ever received. Those benefits are (tenselessly) part of our lives. Why should this intrapersonal fact not temper distress at loss like the interpersonal fact? After all, one is intimately related to oneself. Consider a specific example. Suppose I am about to die. I am distressed that my imminent death will deprive me of my beloved and destroy my valued relationship. I believe that my connection to my beloved will soon be utterly annihilated; the universe will forever pry us apart and forget the love we had. And then you tell me that all the good times I had with my beloved exist in a real and concrete sense, that my valued relationship with my beloved is and always will be “out there.” No matter how things unfold, this will never change. If you tell me this, then the sense in which I, a spacetime worm,

¹⁸ Saying exactly why is difficult and is not essential to my project. But I think it has something to do with the feeling that the cared for thing is not unequivocally gone from your life after all. You care for your friend for their own sake, and you are emotionally attuned to the good of your friend like you are to your own good (this is part and parcel of what care theorist Nel Noddings (2013) calls “engrossment,” which she argues is an integral element in the caring relation). Since the pleasure of wine is still present for your friend, still part of your friend’s good, it feels like the pleasure of wine is still part of your good too. We might say that the benefit shapes your emotional attitudes vicariously.

am losing something precious to me becomes more equivocal than it initially appeared. And this might appropriately make me—or a certain type of person—feel a little better. I might find myself thinking, “Well, at least parts of me are enjoying my beloved as before.”

If this is right, then it applies to all losses, not just the losses of death. But there is some reason for thinking that Standard B-theory might have a greater impact on our prospective attitudes towards the losses of death than on our prospective attitudes towards other losses, since we can anticipate that the losses of death will not cause any unpleasant experiences in us. Our concerns about death are thus less grounded in our concerns about the quality of our experience and consequently may be more susceptible to influence by abstract considerations.

Standard B-theory will not help with deprivations that are not losses, of course. For instance, Standard B-theory cannot temper a dying parent's distress about the fact that their death will deprive them of the chance to meet their unborn grandchildren. Hence, Standard B-theory cannot totally assuage distress about the deprivations of death. But losses are one of the most distressing parts about the deprivations of death, so it may still have a significant impact.¹⁹

Although the ideas I have just presented strike me as compelling, I am not sure that this does not reflect some sort of idiosyncrasy in me. I do, however, think that my remarks can be defended against some objections that might initially seem compelling. First, one might object that someone who does not accept Standard B-theory can gain the same sort of consolation in the face of loss by simply reminiscing. For example, someone who is about to die may find that their distress at the imminent loss of their beloved is tempered by reminiscing about the good times they had with their beloved. And even a presentist can say that I am benefitting from the things I have lost (or will lose) in a tenseless sense, so long as it is understood that something happens in a tenseless sense if and only if it either did happen, is happening, or will happen.²⁰ So maybe Standard B-theory does not play any substantial role in tempering distress.

Reminiscence can certainly temper distress about loss. Yet from both a commonsense and presentist standpoint reminiscence is always about things that have passed away in some metaphysically significant sense. And this is one of the main reasons why reminiscence is often tinged with sadness, which cannot be obviated by linguistic stipulation. For someone who has really adopted the B-theoretic frame of mind, there is less reason to be sad about the fact that

¹⁹ Can Standard B-theory temper distress about the fact that one's impending death will make one's lifetime well-being level lower than it otherwise would have been? Not directly, since Standard B-theory gives us no reason to deny that it is better to have more rather than less good in one's life (all else being equal). But in practice I suspect that distress about this somewhat abstract fact is often associated with and amplified by more specific concerns about the losses of things that contribute to or constitute lifetime well-being, so perhaps Standard B-theory can indirectly make the fact more bearable. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for prompting me to consider this point.

²⁰ I assume here that the presentist can make sense of the truth of claims about the past and the future.

the good things in one's life are in the past. Given our future bias, it would undoubtedly be preferable for those things to be in the future. But at least those things are not utterly and unequivocally gone from the world. At least I am enjoying the benefits of life somewhere, if not here.

A second objection stems from the way B-theory has been used to defend the commonsense idea that death and its losses are bad for the dier against an argument associated with Epicurus. Basically, this argument says that death and its losses cannot be bad for the dier, because death annihilates the dier, and something can be bad for a person only if they exist. (People exist before they die, of course, but no one suffers the bads of death before they die; see Epicurus, *Letter to Menoecus*). Epicurus' argument appears to stick against the presentist, since it is hard to see how a person can stand in the *bad for* relation with their death if they do not in any way coexist with it. However, some philosophers have argued that Epicurus' argument is ineffective against views like B-theory because on such views people coexist with their deaths in the timeless sense (Silverstein 1980). This seems to undermine my claim that Standard B-theory offers consolation *vis-à-vis* loss and annihilation relative to presentism, since Standard B-theory might actually be required to make sense of why annihilation and loss are bad for the dier.

I do not have the space here to critically examine Epicurus' argument or the aforementioned B-theoretic response. It will serve my purposes to note a few things. First, from the supposition that Standard B-theory avoids Epicurus' argument, nothing follows about how Standard B-theorists should feel about death. Second, even if presentists have one way of arguing we should feel better about death that is not available to Standard B-theory, there can be other ways of arguing for the same conclusion that are available to Standard B-theory but not presentism, like the ones I have been considering. Finally, this objection at most shows that Standard B-theory is not a consolation relative to presentism. Assuming the objection is successful, it may still be true that Standard B-theory has the power to assuage some common negative emotions concerning death.

I now turn to the final section of the paper. I discuss other versions of A-theory, the psychological presuppositions of my arguments, and Standard B-theorists who have not lived a good life. I then conclude the paper.

Section 4: Objections, Replies, and Conclusion

Up until this point I have been contrasting Standard B-theory with commonsense and presentism. These views approach the past and persistence very differently than Standard B-theory, and this has been important to my arguments. There are other versions of A-theory that do not share all of presentism's assumptions about the past and persistence, however. *Growing block* says that past and present things exist. *Moving spotlight* says that past, present, and future things exist. And both views are compatible with spacetime worms. One might object that these versions of A-theory can be just as consoling as Standard B-theory because and insofar as they

accept the reality of the past and spacetime worms. Thus, there is no reason for thinking that Standard B-theory is unique with respect to the consolation it offers.

The extent to which my arguments translate to growing block and moving spotlight primarily depends on what the advantage of existing in the objective present is supposed to be on these views. Assuming there is some significant advantage to being in the objective present, adherents have more reason than Standard B-theorists to lament that their time is growing short, since as time passes they have less and less of that advantage left. Additionally, adherents (presumably) cannot think of spatiotemporal locational facts as analogous to spatial ones, since the advantage to being in the present is (presumably) not analogous to that of now being in a particular place. Thus, on this assumption the arguments concerning annihilation and loss would have less force. But if there is no significant advantage to being in the objective present, then my arguments very well may translate to growing block and moving spotlight. Consequently, Standard B-theory may not be unique in the consolation it offers.

A-theorists seemingly do have reason to care about whether they exist in the present. So, it seems as if my arguments will not translate particularly well. Admittedly, this issue is complicated by the fact that it is not obvious why existing in the present should matter to A-theorists who believe past things exist. Blockers potentially have more to say about this. For blockers see the present as the cutting edge of existence. The future of, say, a thirty-year-old man living in the objective present is objectively open; the future of thirty-year-old McTaggart is objectively closed. Blockers can say that presentness is advantageous because genuine human life or activity requires objective openness.²¹ Spotlighters have much more trouble explaining the advantage of the present, since the present is not the cutting edge. Nevertheless, if presentness is to have any metaphysical significance at all, there must be *some* meaningful sense in which the present is where the action's at. And presumably it is better to be where the action's at than where it is not. Thus, blockers and spotlighters seemingly have more reason to lament an exit from the present than Standard B-theorists. Standard B-theory is unique in that it denies there is any reason for lamenting such a thing.

Another sort of objection targets the psychological presuppositions of my arguments. One objection in this vein questions whether we are psychologically capable of adopting Standard B-theory on anything more than a purely intellectual level. Furthermore, even if it were psychologically possible for Standard B-theory to meaningfully affect one's emotional life, the objector could question whether this would really be all-things-considered desirable given that many of our emotions have tensed contents.²²

²¹ Some blockers argue that consciousness can occur only in the present (Forrest 2004, 2006), and this idea has been invoked to explain the significance of death (Robson 2017 pp. 916-918).

²² This objection is inspired by and adapted from a critique of Le Poidevin made by Burley (2008b). As Burley notes, ever since Prior's "Thank goodness that's over" argument (1959), B-theorists have been concerned to show that B-theory does not entail that the majority of our emotional

A related objection complains that my arguments implausibly presuppose that it is psychologically possible for us to jettison our future bias. Derek Parfit discusses a character without future bias, called 'Timeless.' For Timeless, looking back is just like looking forward: future and past benefits are equally cheering, future and past harms equally distressing (1984 pp. 170-177). The objector could admit that my arguments would resonate with someone like Timeless. Perhaps it would even be good for us to be like Timeless since death would be less distressing (as Parfit argues).²³ But we, unlike Timeless, have a strong and recalcitrant future bias, which is unaffected by the belief that the past is real and no less alive than the present. Hence, Standard B-theory cannot console creatures like us.

Behind these objections is the important insight that A-theoretic thinking is both largely inevitable and integral to human life. At each moment, our practical and epistemic agency root us in the subjective present and impose upon us a one-way directionality from subjective past to subjective future. It is therefore unsurprising that we usually cannot help but think in A-theoretic terms, that our emotional lives are saturated with tensed contents, and that we care differently about the past and the future. Although we can understand and accept it, Standard B-theory cannot dislodge our deep-seated A-theoretic proclivities. Even if it could, this would likely transform us into something unrecognizable.

These considerations show, I think, that Standard B-theory cannot completely dissolve our negative attitudes towards death. Nevertheless, it seems psychologically possible for a Standard B-theorist to contemplate her beliefs such that they become emotionally salient for a short time. In such contemplative moments, the Standard B-theorist can rationally feel differently about death. True, once the Standard B-theorist quits her contemplation, her A-theoretic prejudices will involuntarily return and the corresponding emotional attitudes with them. Yet the memory of her contemplative attitudes may mingle with and attenuate her ordinary attitudes, resulting in an altered (but still recognizable) emotional life. In this way, Standard B-theory can offer us partial (if inevitably adulterated) consolation.²⁴

The picture I am presenting, then, does presuppose that Standard B-theory can affect our emotional lives. But it does not presuppose that we can become like Timeless or that wholesale

attitudes are irrational or mistaken. The standard B-theoretic line, due to Mellor (1994a; 1994b) and MacBeath (1994), is to say that our emotional attitudes can be rational so long as they are directed at what we reasonably believed to be true. For instance, we can (rationally) be thankful that a migraine is in the past (even though there is no such fact) so long as it seems to us to be in the past.

²³ Cf. Sullivan (2018), who argues that temporal bias is irrational.

²⁴ Contemplation might affect the Standard B-theorist's ordinary outlook by, among other things, putting her in an equanimous mood. Moods often persist beyond the events that occasion them, after all. And there does not seem to be anything inherently irrational about this. Thanks to Daniel Telech for this suggestion.

revision of our emotional lives is possible or desirable. We are only required to accept that our emotional lives are complex and sensitive to multiple, sometimes competing outlooks.

Let us consider one final objection. One might worry that the solace of Standard B-theory is only available to someone who has had a good life. For painful experiences, bad relationships, and humiliating failures are no less eternally real than the good things in life. In a sense, even death does not constitute an escape from them.

I think this is right. The problem is not limited to those who have not had a good life. Standard B-theory can be uncomfortable for anyone who wishes that parts of their past would disappear into utter oblivion. I think this shows that whether Standard B-theory ultimately provides solace to a particular person depends a great deal upon what sort of life that person has lived; for some, it may provoke horror or giddiness rather than comfort.²⁵

This objection raises a further issue. For this giddiness may seep into one's viewpoint on the subjective present even if one does not have an odious past. If the subjective past is not unequivocally transitory, then the subjective present is not either. From a certain objective perspective, one's present choices, experiences, and relationships abide, no matter how evanescent they may feel. They almost take on a tinge of eternal recurrence. When contemplating these ideas, one may find that one's choices seem to possess a strange indelibility and weight, which is simultaneously dizzying and opposed to one's mortality.²⁶ All this is to say that Standard B-theory may not have an unambiguously ameliorative impact on a Standard B-theorist's emotional life.

I have argued that accepting and reflecting on Standard B-theory rationally can change the significance of one's own mortality for some people. Standard B-theorists need not worry about time growing short. And Standard B-theorists, or at least Standard B-theorists who have had good lives, may feel consoled (but also perhaps giddy) at the thought that they and the things they lose in death are not utterly obliterated from a tenseless perspective. Any consolation

²⁵ Several authors have taken the indelibility of past evils to be a consequence that counts against views like Standard B-theory according to which (apparently) past times are real. For instance, R. T. Mullins (2014) argues that Christian theologians should reject such views because, among other things, the tenseless existence of past evils exaggerates the problem of evil and reduces the plausibility of certain theodicies. Francesco Orilia (2016) mentions similar theological considerations (pp. 251-252), but also argues in a more general way that presentism is morally or emotionally preferable because, among other things, "...whatever comfort we may gain from the thought that joyful past events exist *sub specie aeternitatis*, this can hardly balance the dismay for the analogous existence of the sorrowful ones: the dismay prevails, even if in the past there had been overall, let us imagine, more joy than sorrow." (p. 232; see also Orilia 2018a, 2018b). These authors emphasize the gloomy aspects of Standard B-theory more than I do. Theological considerations aside, the perspective of Mullins and Orilia is an important counterweight to the tentatively optimistic perspective I have allowed myself to take on here.

²⁶ Compare this with Nietzsche's discussion of the eternal recurrence (2001 pp. 194-195 (§341)).

Standard B-theory brings will be partial, since A-theoretic prejudices are psychologically recalcitrant, and one may lament mortality for other reasons that are unaffected by Standard B-theory.²⁷ Still, nothing is stopping the consolation of Standard B-theory from mingling with and attenuating one's ordinary feelings about one's own mortality, even in one's unreflective moments.

Acknowledgements: Thanks to Thomas Barrett, Natalja Deng, Jeremey Dickinson, Catelynn Kenner, David King, Dan Korman, Daniel Telech, Travis Timmerman, Robert Wallace and three anonymous reviewers for generously commenting on this material. Thanks especially to Sam Zahn; I am glad that some of our temporal parts are indelibly "out there," in glittering Santa Barbara, discussing this stuff together.

²⁷ For instance, one can lament mortality because it frustrates future-directed categorical desires, such as a desire to visit space, write a novel, or meet one's grandchildren (see Williams 1973). Unfortunately, I do not see how Standard B-theory can in general make this frustration easier to bear. See also note 19.

Works Cited

- Augustine. *Confessions*. Translated by Henry Chadwick, Oxford University Press, 2008.
- Belshaw, Christopher. *Annihilation: The Sense and Significance of Death*. McGill-Queen's University Press, 2009.
- Benatar, David. *The Human Predicament: A Candid Guide to Life's Biggest Questions*. Oxford University Press, 2017.
- Blatti, Stephan. "Death's Distinctive Harm." *American Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 49, no. 4, 2012, pp. 317-330.
- Bradley, Ben. *Well-Being and Death*. Oxford University Press, 2009.
- Brueckner, Anthony L. and John Martin Fischer. "Why Is Death Bad?" *Philosophical Studies*, vol. 50, 1986, pp. 213-223.
- Burley, Mikel. "The B-Theory of Time and the Fear of Death." *Polish Journal of Philosophy*, vol. II, no. 2, 2008a, pp. 21-38.
- Burley, Mikel. "Should A B-Theoretic Atheist Fear Death?" *Ratio*, vol. XXI, no. 3, 2008b, pp. 260-272.
- Deng, Natalja. "Fine's McTaggart, temporal passage, and the A versus B-debate." *Ratio*, vol. 26, no. 1, 2013, pp. 19-34.
- Deng, Natalja. "On Whether B-Theoretic Atheists Should Fear Death." *Philosophia*, vol. 43, 2015, pp. 1011-1021.
- Draper, K. "Disappointment, Sadness, and Death." *Philosophical Review*, vol. 108, no. 3, 1999, pp. 387-414.
- Einstein, Albert. *Albert Einstein, Michele Besso: Correspondance, 1903-1955*. Translated by Pierre Speziali. Hermann, 1972.
- Epicurus. *Letter to Menoeceus*. Translated by Robert Drew Hicks. In *The Internet Classics Archive*, MIT Press. <http://classics.mit.edu/Epicurus/menoec.html>. Accessed April 20, 2020.
- Feldman, Fred. "Some Puzzles About the Evil of Death." *The Philosophical Review*, vol 100, no. 2, 1991, pp. 205-227.
- Forrest, Peter. "The real but dead past: a reply to Braddon-Mitchell." *Analysis*, vol 64, no. 4, 2004, pp. 358-362.
- Forrest, Peter. "Uniform Grounding of Truth and the Growing Block Theory: A Reply to Heathwood." *Analysis*, vol 66, no. 2, 2006, pp. 161-163.
- Hesse, Herman. *Siddhartha*. Translated by Hilda Rosner. Quality Paperback Book Club, 1995.
- Kamm, F. M. *Mortality, Mortality: Death and Whom to Save from It*, vol. 1. Oxford University Press, 1993.
- Larkin, Philip. "Aubade." *The Complete Poems*. Ed. Archie Burnett. Farrar, Straus and Giroux. 2012, pp. 115-116.
- Le Poidevin, Robin. *Arguing for Atheism: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*. Routledge, 1996.
- Leininger, Lisa. "On Mellor and the Future Direction of Time." *Analysis*, vol. 74, no. 1, 2013, pp. 1-9.
- Leslie, John. *Immortality Defended*. Blackwell Publishing, 2007.
- MacBeath, Murray. "Mellor's Emeritus Headache." in *The New Theory of Time*, eds. Nathan Oaklander and Quentin Smith, 1994, pp. 305-311.
- McMahan, Jeff. "Death and the Value of Life." *Ethics*, vol. 99, no. 1, 1988, pp. 32-61.

- McTaggart, J. Ellis. "The Unreality of Time." *Mind*, vol. 17, no. 68, 1908, pp. 457-474.
- Mellor, D. H. "'Thank Goodness That's Over.'" in *The New Theory of Time*, eds. Nathan Oaklander and Quentin Smith, 1994a, pp. 293-304.
- Mellor, D. h. "MacBeath's Soluble Aspirin." in *The New Theory of Time*, eds. Nathan Oaklander and Quentin Smith, 1994b, pp. 312-315.
- Mullins, R. T. "Four-Dimensionalism, Evil, and Christian Belief." *Philosophia Christi*, vol. 16, no. 1, 2014, pp. 117-137.
- Nagel, Thomas. "Death." *Noûs*, vol. 4, no. 1, 1970, pp. 73-80.
- Nagel, Thomas. *The View From Nowhere*. Oxford University Press, 1986.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Trans. Walter Kaufman. The Modern Library, 1995.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Gay Science*. Trans. Josefine Nauckhoff. Ed. Bernard Williams. Cambridge University Press, 2001.
- Noddings, Nel. *Caring: A Relational Approach to Ethics and Moral Education*. 2nd ed., University of California Press, 2013.
- Orilia, Francesco. "On the Existential side of the Eternalism-Presentism Dispute." *Manuscrito*, vol. 39, no. 4, 2016, pp. 225-254.
- Orilia, Francesco. "The Moral Desirability of Presentism." In *God, Time, Infinity*. Ed. Miroslaw Szatkowski. De Gruyter, 2018a.
- Orilia, Francesco. "Time, Modality and Moral Desirability." *Hermeneutica*, vol. 25, 2018b, pp. 137-154.
- Parfit, Derek. *Reasons and Persons*. Oxford University Press, 1984.
- Prior, A. N. "Thank Goodness that's Over." *Philosophy*, vol 34, is. 128, 1959, pp. 12-17.
- Robson, Jon. "A-Time to Die: A Growing Block Account of the Evil of Death." *Philosophia*, vol. 42, 2017, pp. 911-925.
- Scheffler, Samuel. *Death and the Afterlife*. Oxford University Press, 2016.
- Shiffrin, Seana Valentine. "Preserving the Valued or Preserving Valuing?" in *Death and the Afterlife*. Ed. Niko Kolodny. Oxford University Press, 2016.
- Sider, Theodore. *Four-Dimensionalism: An Ontology of Persistence and Time*. Oxford University Press, 2001.
- Siderits, Mark. *Buddhism as Philosophy: An Introduction*. Hackett. 2007
- Silverstein, Harry S. "The Evil of Death." *Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 77, no. 7, 1980, pp. 401-424.
- Sullivan, Meghan. *Time Biases: A Theory of Rational Planning and Personal Persistence*. Oxford University Press, 2018.
- Velleman, David. "Self to Self." *The Philosophical Review*, vol. 105, no. 1, 1996, pp. 39-76.
- Velleman, David. "So It Goes." *The Amherst Lecture in Philosophy*, Lecture 1, 2006, pp. 1-23.
- Velleman, David. *On Being Me: A Personal Invitation to Philosophy*. Princeton University Press, 2020.
- Vonnegut, Kurt. *Slaughterhouse-Five, or The Children's Crusade*. Delacorte, 1969.
- Williams, Bernard. "The Makropulos case: Reflections on the tedium of immortality." in *Problems of the Self: Philosophical Papers 1956-1972*. Cambridge University Press, 1973, pp. 82-100.
- Williams, Donald C. "The Myth of Passage." *The Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 48, no. 15, 1951, pp. 457-472.