

REVIEWS

David Cockburn, *Other Times: Philosophical Perspectives on Past, Present and Future*, Cambridge University Press, 1997, pp. xvi + 355, £40.00.

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The starting-point for this book is Spinoza's remark that '[i]n so far as the mind conceives a thing under the dictates of reason, it is affected equally, whether the idea be of a thing future, past, or present' (*Ethics*, IV). In this proposition David Cockburn sees an early statement of what has come to be called the tenseless theory of time. This theory, in its modern form, holds that distinctions of *tense* – that is, attributions of pastness, presentness or futurity to events or individuals – do not reflect a division in reality, but only mark our perspective on a tenseless reality, and that in consequence all times (including the 'other times' of the title, namely past and future times) are equally real. In opposition to this, the tensed theory holds that reality is, independently of our representations of it, tensed. This is often, but not invariably, accompanied by belief in the unreality of the future, and sometimes of the past also.

But, one might object, Spinoza is not talking about the reality of tensed distinctions at all, but about the attitudes that such distinctions engender. He recognises that we do in fact feel grief at the death of a loved one, dread at the thought of some unwelcome event looming on the horizon, relief at its passing, but he does not see these as the product of reasoned reflection. A purely rational creature would be unaffected by the mere tense of an event, which is not to say that she would be unaffected by the event itself. So Spinoza is concerned with the relationships between tensed attitudes, reason and emotion, and not, it seems, with the reality underlying those attitudes. However, as Cockburn points out, what motivates this rather striking thesis of Spinoza's is the thought that the tense of an attitude makes no difference to its content – i.e. marks no real distinction:

'the image of a thing, regarded in itself alone, is identical, whether it be referred to time past, time future, or time present' (ibid., III). Putting these various thoughts together, and presenting them in contemporary terms, we have something like this: if the tenseless theory of time is correct, we should, in so far as we are concerned to give our emotional attitudes a rational basis, revise or abandon the temporally asymmetric nature of those attitudes. Further, we should check any tendency towards a corresponding asymmetry in our ethical attitudes. We should, for example, reject the view that the moral value or disvalue of an act diminishes with the passage of time.

Now contemporary tenseless theorists have typically resisted the idea that their position – which after all, they say, is a purely metaphysical one – has any implications for our emotional lives. Where this point is explicitly discussed in their writings, it is often focused on a problem of Arthur Prior's: when I thank goodness that a once-dreaded event is over, I feel relief that it is *past*, and not because of some supposedly tenseless fact, such as the event's being earlier than this thought. There is no problem here, say the tenseless theorists. My relief is caused by a tensed thought ('It's now over'), but what makes that thought *true* is a purely tenseless fact. Against this, Cockburn argues that the tenseless theory does have significant implications, both for the rationality of our emotional attitudes, and, relatedly, those of our ethical attitudes (there is no clear duality here, of course: consider feelings of admiration, guilt, shame, love, etc., all of which have a moral element). Now this is an interesting thesis in itself, but Cockburn has a yet more radical one to advance: 'the dispute between the tensed and tenseless theories simply *is*, unbeknown to its central contemporary participants, a dispute about the place which tense should occupy in our justifications of action and feeling' (p. 8). The notion of justification here is crucial. Emotions are not just things we happen to have, they are not merely caused by our beliefs: they can, or should, be capable of being rationalised; an emotion can coherently be described as appropriate or inappropriate. Tenseless theory thus faces a dilemma: either it must take a consistently non-cognitivist line over emotion, and hold, implausibly, that emotions do not have propositional content, or it must regard much of our natural emotional and ethical attitudes as standing in need of revision.

Cockburn says he does not want to take sides in the tensed/tenseless debate, but simply to provide a clear conception of what that

debate is. And what it is not, or at least what it ought not to be, is a purely metaphysical debate, where 'metaphysical' implies abstraction from any human context. Here is just one illustration of what Cockburn means by this. Take the apparently purely metaphysical notion of the passage of time, which we might envisage as events becoming present and then receding into the past, or as reality constantly growing as part of what is purely potential becomes actual. The passing of time is typically appealed to by tensed theorists to explain our changing attitudes to events. As a much-longed for event approaches us in time we get more and more excited, and at its passing the excitement is replaced by, perhaps, a feeling of anticlimax, sadness or disappointment. And its capacity to fill such an explanatory role is sometimes appealed to by tensed theorists to justify their metaphysical position. But this, argues Cockburn, gets things the wrong way round. The abstract notion of time's passage is obscure enough – we might draw an analogy with movement through space, though since such movement involves a temporal component the analogy is unhelpful – but even if we can form a conception of it, how is it supposed to explain our emotional reactions? We should, rather, view our changing emotional attitudes as *giving content* to the idea of the passage of time. What it is for time to flow is, at least in part, for there to be a change in our feelings towards an individual or event. Another example of this kind of reversal occurs in Cockburn's discussion of freedom. It is not that a metaphysical view concerning the unreality of the future is needed to ground our belief in human freedom, but rather that we think of some future event as being real or determined precisely when we regard it as beyond our control (as with the movements of the planets), and undetermined when it is at least partly a matter for us to decide.

The book's main title echoes, no doubt consciously, that of Cockburn's earlier *Other Human Beings*, and there is a thematic link, too. In that earlier book, Cockburn had argued that the notion of the self was not conceptually primitive. I do not, for example, base my idea of what it is for others to be subjects of experiences on a prior understanding of myself as such a subject. *Other Times* argues for an analogous thesis: the present tense is not prior to the past and future tenses. One does not first grasp an idea of what it is for something to be present, and then go on to form a concept of past and future. Cockburn points to a number of examples of what seem at

first sight to be relatively simple present-tensed reports (that is a sapling, there is my mother sitting on the sofa) only to reveal the implications they hold for past and future times. He then puts this interdependence of our concept of the present time on the one hand and that of past and future times on the other to interesting uses. One is to question the coherence or possibility of the ethical injunction to 'live for the present': to concentrate simply on what is now happening or on what one is now doing. Another is to undermine a certain line of thought about death which has been developed by Nagel: that death is to be feared because of its unwelcome effects when it is *present* (namely, its depriving us of goods we would otherwise have enjoyed). Why, asks Cockburn, should our fear of future death not simply be an appropriate response in need of no further justification in terms of what we disvalue among present events?

Despite Cockburn's professed neutrality, it is pretty clear by the end (indeed, throughout) where his sympathies lie. He is critical of a number of arguments for the tenseless view, and he is suspicious of attempts to represent that theory as a purely metaphysical account of what makes true our tensed judgements – indeed, he warns against deriving any significant ontological conclusions from statements of the 'truth-conditions' of sentences. But if the traditional tenseless theory is discredited, so too it seems is the move Cockburn sees in Spinoza: from treating the content of a thought as indifferent to tense to treating emotion as, in Cockburn's apt phrase, 'a mere epiphenomenon to the life of reason' (p. 33). Of course, Cockburn is equally suspicious of traditional statements of the tensed theory which often place a heavy ontological burden on ineliminable features of thought and language, hence his desire to demythologise the passage of time. But if the reconstructed tensed theory stands for according tensed thought a central place in our ethical lives, then surely Cockburn can, indeed does, endorse it. His parting comment on the tenseless theory certainly does not suggest that it is a view which holds many attractions for him: 'the tenseless view, properly understood, is not the articulation of a metaphysical truth which lies behind the terms in which we normally speak and think of time; it is an ideal for our thought – for our lives – of which we can, perhaps, just about make sense' (p. 343).

However, we might wonder whether the version of tensed theory to which Cockburn is sympathetic is entirely compatible with one of his main theses. If tenses are to occupy a central role in providing

reasons for our ethical attitudes, then they must, to some extent, at least, be independent of those attitudes. But Cockburn wants to say that those attitudes are a crucial part of the content of assertions about the objectivity of tense. As far as I can see, Cockburn does not face this difficulty head on, but something he says in another context suggests a line of response which would go something like this. Priority disputes are often based on a false dichotomy, namely that where there are logical (or quasi-logical) links between A and B, *either* A is more fundamental than B *or* B is more fundamental than A. But why should there not be an interdependence between these? A full grasp either of A or of B requires a grasp of the other: our understanding of them may develop together. So, for example, we should not be misled by the logical relation between 'x is past and y present' and 'x is earlier than y' into thinking that, therefore, the 'earlier than' relation must be dependent upon tensed properties or *vice versa*.

One issue which gets surprisingly little explicit attention in *Other Times* is the difference between the 'old' and 'new' versions of the (traditional, metaphysical) tenseless theory. The old theory proposed that any tensed component of a thought or statement (e.g. 'now') was eliminable in favour of some tenseless construction ('simultaneously with this thought') without there being a change in meaning. The new theory dispensed with this, and recognised the importance of tense in thought for timely action. Cockburn notes this move, which is made much of by tenseless theorists, but does not regard it as providing a way out of the dilemma concerning emotions articulated above (*viz.* the choice between non-cognitivism or revisionism). Now this I think is debatable. Let us allow that tensed beliefs have an important role to play, not just in the explanation, but also in the justification of our emotional states. I am *sad that* the reunion with my childhood friend is *now over*, and do not merely feel sadness as a causal effect of my belief that it is over. Now the old tenseless theory cannot accommodate this idea because it takes the tense to be eliminable. But where is the conflict with the new theory? Admittedly, the new tenseless theorist cannot point to the truth-makers of my belief that the meeting is now over as providing the justification, for these are tenseless. But why descend to the level of truth-makers? Why cannot my reasons for my feelings just be other true beliefs? Of course, the new theory may be vulnerable on other grounds, and indeed Cockburn devotes a few pages to the

debunking of talk of 'tenseless truth-conditions'. So perhaps the reason why the new tenseless theory cannot avoid the dilemma over emotion faced by its predecessor is simply that it is an unstable position, liable at any moment to collapse either into a tautology or into the old theory. But this part of the discussion I found a little schematic and underdeveloped. Cockburn begins his attack by casting doubt on the idea that, in providing the truth-conditions of a statement, we are showing what in reality, independently of languages and minds, makes true a linguistic item, rather than merely showing a relation between two fragments of a language. But instead of defending this point, he retreats to the weaker assertion that the mere availability of a truth-conditional schema is not sufficient to ground an ontological position. Well, I am happy to concur with that: one does need to show what advantages such a schema affords, what role tenseless facts are better suited to play than tensed ones. (And the answer cannot simply be 'providing truth-conditions for tensed statements'.) I am not persuaded that the tenseless theorist cannot meet that challenge.

Let me admit that I am a hardened and unashamed (not-so-) 'new' tenseless theorist. I was, nevertheless, greatly stimulated by David Cockburn's remarkable book. His discussion is rich and subtle, covering a wide range of related issues, and drawing on countless examples from ordinary life to support his arguments. He has made a splendid case for shifting, or at least widening, the debate about tense to give ethical issues a central place, and his exploration of the relationship between tense and ethics represents a significant advance on previous work, notably by Nagel and Parfit. And the message which lies at the heart of the book demands our serious attention: that, if one abstracts the debate about the reality of tense and of other times from the human context which gives temporal talk its substantive content, one should not expect to derive consequences which have human significance.

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Bede Rundle, *Mind in Action*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1997, pp. x + 299, £35.00 (hb).

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The thesis that the mental must have a causal aspect, or more forcefully, must be defined in terms of its causal aspect, is a ruling force in today's analytical philosophy of mind. It has taken root so deeply that in some circles, such as cognitive science, not only is it beyond question, it limits the imagination to the extent that it is inconceivable that things could be otherwise. Bede Rundle's book is an extended attempt to challenge this *status quo* by means of a 'grammatical investigation' in the tradition of Ryle, Austin and Wittgenstein. In the process it covers quite a number of diverse topics in the philosophy of mind such as: physicalism, consciousness, propositional attitude ascription, animal behaviour, intending and desiring, action, reasoning and decision-making and ultimately issues concerning freewill.

Apart from the fact that these treacherous topics are all sources of philosophical myth-making, they are also linked because they can be fruitfully understood if we look at them in light of the practice of 're-describing behaviour'. This approach is diametrically opposed to that of treating 'the mental' as part of the theoretical enterprise of offering up 'causal hypotheses' in a misguided attempt at explanation (p. 15). Contrasting these two approaches is the major recurrent theme of the book. It emerges in some guise in all of the discussions. For example, in Rundle's discussion of intention and desire he examines the interrogative uses of the verbs 'shall' and 'will' to reveal why it would be a confusion to regard them as heralding a prediction about our own behaviour rather than revealing something about its character. He notes, 'The only real issue is non-predictive, the speaker is seeking reassurance on the wisdom or propriety of the action contemplated, not on the likelihood of his carrying it through' (p. 130). Similarly, like others before him, Rundle claims that the very idea of a 'free action' is befuddled when we think that in order to be free there must be a 'mental cause'. In contrast, he argues convincingly that the notion of 'freedom' is built into the very notion of action itself. It is only behaviours which are under our control that warrant description as actions as opposed to mere

reactions. By realigning our thinking on these issues we are, at the very least, less likely to take the causalist view for granted.

To understand 'the mental' aright we must regard our philosophical task as one of classification as opposed to explanation. It is a conceptual investigation. This may seem like all too familiar and well-trodden territory. But Rundle is at his best when he attempts to embarrass the supporters of the dominant causalist position by focusing on their standardly unquestioned, yet questionable, assumptions. For example, in chapter seven he discusses the important differences between theoretical and practical reasoning in such a way that reveals why it is dubious to simply assume that the end product of decision-making might be the cause of an action. He notes that in ends-means reasoning the choice of a means is unconstrained in a way which makes a deductive model inapplicable. This highlights the difficulties with one of functionalism's most basic and central assumptions; the very idea that content-based decision-making can be so modelled if we simply regard decisions as resulting in the production of actions as opposed to conclusions (p. 195). Like many of Rundle's attacks this is not decisive but it rightly puts the onus on the causalist to respond and to recognise the need to give a fuller account. Throughout the book Rundle periodically peppers his protagonists with simple, but uncomfortable questions which have the same effect. Giving the causalist some rope he asks: 'How could saying to oneself such things as "I must blink", "Let me blink", or "Now is the time to blink" be of any consequence for action?' (p. 167). In this he usefully challenges the currently familiar fashion in which most of today's analytic philosophers uncritically address such topics.

All of this is sober, but not stirring stuff. But its sobriety raises the issue of the target audience of the book. If the aim is to help reassure those already dissatisfied with causalism who are looking for a new home, then this approach has some merit. But as a means of overturning those firmly committed to causalism, Rundle's lack of engagement with the wider literature and his unsympathetic treatment of opponents, make it unlikely to succeed. Given the power and authority of the position he ought to make some attempt to anticipate their likely responses.

This is particularly important given that his positive account wants development and expansion if it is to be convincing. For example, in the case of beliefs he gives grammatical reasons for doubting that we

ought to think of 'believing a proposition' as requiring a relation to an object of some kind. Rather, believing is to be viewed as the expression of an attitude (p. 63). Thus, as an alternative to causalism he encourages us to understand action as 'behaviour which expresses or manifests, a desire and/or belief' (p. 167). So far so good. But if we leave matters here a number of difficult questions are left hanging about how we are to interpret these expressions appropriately. If all we are directed at is the agent's behaviour this will not be, in and of itself, sufficient to warrant particular ascriptions as is well known in light of the work of Quine and Davidson. Talk of 're-describing' behaviour takes us in the right direction but it also leads inexorably into the realm of interpretation. Yet Rundle does not go that far. Nor does he give any pointers for those who are willing to travel further. This *lacuna* which concerns the general issue of content re-emerges in his discussion of the character of animal behaviour.

Once again in discussing this topic his aim is to convince us that there is no need to introduce mental causation into the story. He wants us to recognise that the character of an animal's behaviour generally warrants description in terms of our familiar mentalistic idiom. Despite this he rightly notes that 'a deep difference remains in the way a person, but not an animal, *knows* . . . ' (p. 85). In fact, throughout the entire chapter we regularly find the words *knowledge*, *think*, *learn*, and their relatives, in italics. Rundle's caution is well-founded because he recognises that the responses of most animals are not suggestive of 'a mastery of concepts' (p. 87). We want to say they believe and know but their behaviour does not warrant the ascription of concepts. But what then do they believe and know? To address this question adequately requires some detailed attention to content ascription – even if such content be of a non-conceptual variety. Appeal to behaviour alone, no matter how sophisticated it or its surroundings may be, will not suffice to settle this issue. Unless of course the characterisations we give remain of the derivative kind such that we say: '“The dog *thinks* the squirrel is in the tree” but it has no concepts of squirrel or tree' (p. 90). It is precisely this element of Rundle's account which wants sharpening up.

He tells us that 'What is essential to action, it may be said, is its purposive or goal directed nature' (p. 154). In this context he rightly claims that 'it is purposive behaviour that is being invoked, and this is not a feature which is either crude or simple, not a feature to which a notion of “mere bodily movement” can hope to do justice'

(p. 169). I think this too is a move in the right direction. However, he goes on to suggest that 'What is necessary – to warrant talk of an aim or purpose – is that a creature should show a degree of persistence in its behaviour' (p. 170). But although a necessary component, any number of things, from robots to planets, could show such persistence and yet we would be loathe to regard them as 'behaving' in a purposive way. To make this approach plausible we need a principled means of sorting out the types of things to which our notion of purpose applies. And this is not something that can be gleaned from attention to observable behaviour alone. Rundle remarks that 'in so far as the notion of the mental has application to animals *it is only as part of a more adequate conception of behaviour . . .*' (p. 73, emphasis mine). This is a step in the right direction but it needs to be supplemented with a great deal more than Rundle provides here by means of grammatical cartography if our concept of behaviour is to be appropriately enriched.