

On whether B-theoretic atheists should fear death

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Abstract:

In this paper I revisit a dispute between Mikel Burley and Robin Le Poidevin about whether or not the B-theory of time can give its adherents any reason to be less afraid of death. In ‘Should a B-theoretic atheist fear death?’, Burley argues that even on Le Poidevin’s understanding of the B-theory, atheists shouldn’t be comforted. His reason is that the prevalent B-theoretic account of our attitudes towards the past and future precludes treating our fear of death as unwarranted. I examine his argument and provide a tentative defense of Le Poidevin. I claim that while Burley rightly spots a tension with a non-revisionary approach to our ordinary emotional life, he doesn’t isolate the source of that tension. The real question is how to understand Le Poidevin’s idea that on the B-theory, we and our lives are ‘eternally real’. I then suggest that there is a view of time that does justice to Le Poidevin’s remarks, albeit a strange one. The view takes temporal relations to be quasi-spatial and temporal entities to exist in a totum simul.

1 Introduction

Contemporary metaphysics of time is shaped by the opposition between A-theorists and B-theorists. The B-theory, as it is commonly understood, includes three main tenets. The first is eternalism, which says that all times exist, and that past and future entities (like dinosaurs and Martian outposts) are just as real as present ones.¹ The second is that there are no monadic temporal properties like pastness, presentness or futurity, but only temporal relations like succession and simultaneity. The third is that the fundamental temporal facts are tenseless facts that obtain once and for all, like the fact that my writing this occurs (tenselessly) on a Monday. There are, fundamentally, no tensed facts that change over time, like the fact that it is Monday today. According to the B-theory, a complete description of temporal reality

¹ None of what follows will require the further distinction between substantivalism and relationism, only the former of which posits times understood as entities that are independent of objects and events. But note that I’m assuming that if times so understood exist, they are concrete. That way ersatzist presentism, on which times are abstract entities, doesn’t get (mis-)classified as eternalism.

needn't specify which time is now. It's true that you're reading now, but what makes this true is the fact that you (tenselessly) read at a certain time on a certain day - and that's a fact once and for all.

The B-theory is usually taken to be a theory according to which, in reality, time does not pass.

A handful of philosophers have argued for diverging claims concerning the connection between the B-theory of time and various philosophical questions about death. Thus, Harry Silverstein and Ben Bradley have argued that the B-theory provides a reason for regarding death as an evil for the person who dies (though Bradley has since retracted the claim).² By contrast, Robin Le Poidevin has argued for a claim that pulls in the opposite direction.³ In *Arguing for Atheism* (as well as in 'Time, death and the atheist'), he suggests that a commitment to the B-theory can provide atheists who don't believe in an afterlife with a reason not to fear death, or at least with a reason to fear it less.⁴ (From now on I'll assume that atheists typically don't believe in an afterlife.)

Le Poidevin's understanding of the B-theory (by which I'll mean his view as described in these publications) is rather unusual. Above I listed eternalism, the view that past and future times and objects exist, as the first of the B-theory's three tenets. But in spite of the suggestive label, eternalism is usually taken to be a fairly innocuous doctrine, one without much import for how to view death. Another way to express eternalism is this. Past and future times and entities fall just as squarely within the range of our most unrestricted quantifiers as present ones do. What's comforting about that?

² Silverstein 1980, 2000. Bradley 2004; Bradley 2009, p. 82, footnote 18.

³ Note that the claims are not directly opposed, since Silverstein's concerns the (dis-)value of death, whereas Le Poidevin's concerns reasons to fear death (though Le Poidevin is not explicit about this distinction). Note also that Le Poidevin's suggestion seems broad enough to pertain not only to attitudes towards one's own death, but also that of others.

⁴ Le Poidevin 1996, ch. 10. Le Poidevin 1995.

Another question to ask at this point is why Le Poidevin makes this claim about the B-theory, when it seems to be just about eternalism. After all, there are eternalist A-theories, too. In particular, on the moving spotlight theory, all times exist, but the non-perspectival property of being present moves from earlier to later times.⁵ I'll suggest a possible reason for this emphasis in the final section.

In 'Should a B-theoretic atheist fear death?', Burley argues that even on Le Poidevin's understanding of the B-theory, B-theorists have no less reason to fear death than A-theorists.⁶ His concern is that the prevalent B-theoretic account of our attitudes towards the past and future precludes treating our fear of death as unwarranted. In this paper, I examine his argument and provide a tentative defense of Le Poidevin. I claim that while Burley rightly spots a tension with a non-revisionary approach to our ordinary emotional life, he doesn't isolate the source of that tension. I then suggest that there is a way to negotiate the tension, though the resulting view is a strange one. It takes temporal relations to be quasi-spatial and temporal entities to exist in a totum simul.

I begin by summarising the prevalent B-theoretic approach to our attitudes towards the past and the future (section 2). I then lay out Burley's argument (section 3). Next, I evaluate the argument, and suggest that the real point of contention concerns the sense of 'eternal existence' Le Poidevin has in mind (section 4). Finally (section 5), I sketch the view that I think is suggested by Le Poidevin's remarks, and show how it might still be combined with a non-revisionary approach to our attitudes towards the past and the future.

2 The B-theoretic account of tensed emotions

⁵ For recent defenses of the moving spotlight view see Skow 2012, Deasy 2014. Another example of an eternalist A-theory is the minimal A-theory Sullivan 2012.

⁶ Burley 2008a.

Recall Arthur Prior's 'Thank Goodness that's over' challenge. The challenge was originally directed towards the claim that all tensed sentences could be translated by means of tenseless sentences without loss of meaning. The challenge was this: if 'thank goodness that's over', uttered at t , meant the same as 'thank goodness the conclusion of that thing is at t ' or 'thank goodness the conclusion of that thing is simultaneous with this utterance', then why would anyone say or think it?

Nowadays, most B-theorists do not hold that tensed sentences can be so translated. Instead, the new B-theory merely says that tensed utterances can be given tenseless truth conditions, so that when they are true, they are made true by tenseless, not tensed facts. But clearly, a similar challenge arises for the new B-theory: what am I thanking goodness for when I utter at noon, 'thank goodness that's over'? Not the tensed fact that the experience is over, i.e. past, for there is no such fact. Nor the tenseless fact that the conclusion of the experience is at noon – that was a fact all morning. Nor the fact that the conclusion of the experience is simultaneous with my utterance 'thank goodness that's over' – why would anyone thank goodness for that? More generally, the challenge is to tell a B-theoretic story about the objects of emotions such as dread, joyous anticipation, relief, anxiety, nostalgia, and so forth. Let's call these 'tensed emotions'. They're emotions directed towards the pastness, presentness or futurity of events.

The prevalent B-theoretic response to Prior's challenge (due mainly to Mellor and MacBeath) is as follows.⁷ Belief reports and reports of emotions generate non-extensional contexts. I can believe that George Orwell wrote 1984 while not believing that Eric Blair wrote 1984 (even though George Orwell is Eric Blair). Similarly, I can thank goodness for the fact that my pain is past while not thanking goodness for the fact that the conclusion of my pain is at noon, even though the fact that makes my belief that it's past true is the fact that the

⁷ Mellor 1981, 1983. MacBeath 1983.

conclusion is at noon. My relief is directed at what I believe to be the case, namely that the pain is past. This is the content of the past tensed belief, and the intentional object of my relief.⁸

So B-theorists can distinguish between what a tensed emotion is directed at, and the underlying tenseless facts. They can also hold that even a false tensed belief can give rise to a warranted tensed emotion – just as long as the belief itself is warranted. If I have reason to believe tomorrow’s dentist visit will be painful, I have reason to dread it, even if it turns out that the visit will be cancelled, or will be painless.

3 Burley’s argument

Recall that Burley thinks this account implies that even on Le Poidevin’s understanding of the B-theory, B-theorists have no less reason to fear death than A-theorists.

He begins by pointing out that B-theorists don’t recommend that we change our tensed emotional life, nor do they think tensed emotions involve a pervasive error. On the contrary, the account described above is intended to allow B-theorists to hold that our tensed emotions are intelligible, and often appropriate.

He then considers two candidate beliefs concerning the fear of death that are unwarranted by B-theoretic standards, namely a hypochondriac’s unwarranted belief that they’ll die soon, and someone’s delusional belief that they have already died. He dismisses

⁸ A further question that is often put to B-theorists in this context is this. Why are certain tensed emotions (such as relief, nostalgia etc.) appropriate only after events, and others (such as dread, anticipation etc.) appropriate only before events? But as Mellor already notes, A-theorists are in no better a position to provide an explanation here than B-theorists (e.g. why feel dread only towards future events?). Moreover, it’s not clear that all our tensed emotions are appropriate. What’s clear is that the temporal asymmetry in our attitudes is curious, and interesting evolutionary explanations of this and other temporal biases have been given (Dyke & Maclaurin 2002, Suhler & Callender 2012).

these as not relevant to Le Poidevin's thesis. After all, he says, the latter concerns a fear of annihilation, rather than of dying at some particular time, let alone of having died already.

'[T]he pertinent question to ask is: Is someone who disbelieves in an afterlife warranted in fearing death according to the Mellor-MacBeath account of the way in which our emotions connect with our beliefs? One might think that, in order to conform to the details of Le Poidevin's proposal, we would need to add to this question the clause: 'given that the person concerned accepts the B-theory'. This would be unnecessary, however, as the Mellor-MacBeath account treats one's metaphysical beliefs about time as irrelevant to the warrantedness of one's feelings or emotional attitudes.'⁹

He then lays out what he takes to be the key example:

'Let us, then, consider an atheist, Jo, who fears death because of a particular belief, which has as its propositional content the intentional fact that 'My death will be a passage into oblivion'.¹⁰ (By 'intentional fact' he means the content of the tensed belief in question.)

In a footnote, he adds that the relevant belief's content could also be expressed as 'After I die, I will no longer exist' (provided 'exist' is understood in the tensed, A-theoretic sense).

'According to the B-theory, the truth condition of this belief would be the tenseless fact that there is no time later than Jo's death at which Jo is located. Any B-theorist who denies the possibility of an afterlife should concur that this tenseless fact obtains, and hence [...] that Jo's belief is true.'¹¹

Similarly, Burley concludes, Jo's belief is warranted, since it's responsive to the evidence available to her and consistent with her other beliefs. So her fear of no longer existing after death is warranted, too.

Here is Burley's own summary of his criticism:

'Le Poidevin maintains that, if the B-theory is true, there is some sense in which, at times later than one's death, it remains the case that one exists, even though there are no times later than one's death at which one is located. In this article I have not disputed this claim. Le Poidevin maintains, further, that in view of this B-theoretic fact a commitment to the B-theory gives the atheist a reason to relinquish her fear of death, in so far as that fear of death is a fear of annihilation. This further claim presupposes that a metaphysical belief – specifically a B-

⁹ Burley 2008a, p. 269.

¹⁰ Burley 2008a, p. 269.

¹¹ Burley 2008a, p. 269/70.

theoretic belief – is sufficient to transform an emotional attitude, specifically the fear of death. [...] I have argued that this presupposition is inconsistent with [the Mellor-MacBeath model] [...] [A]ccording to this model, A-theoretic beliefs, but not B-theoretic ones, are sufficient to warrant our emotional attitudes, provided those A-theoretic beliefs are themselves warranted. [...] [They are] warranted by ordinary (non-metaphysical, and hence non-B-theoretic) standards, and [are] sufficient to warrant the accompanying feelings of gladness and relief. I maintain that, by parity of reasoning, an atheist's fear of death is warranted according to the Mellor-MacBeath model, and that a commitment to the B-theory [...] would give such a person no reason to relinquish the fear.'¹²

He concludes that if Le Poidevin's thesis is to stand, what's needed is either a new B-theoretic account of tensed emotions, or an explanation of why our fear of death is a special case.

4 Burley's argument examined

I think Burley's line of thought can be put as follows. On the Mellor-MacBeath model, the tenseless nature of reality is one step removed from our emotional life, where the link consists of true tensed beliefs, held at the right times. If there wasn't this link, and we had only tenseless beliefs, we would never be moved to action ('the meeting is starting now!'), and there wouldn't be any pastness or presentness or futurity (not even in the form of 'intentional facts') to be emotional about. How can the tenseless nature of reality be generally one step removed from our emotions, and yet connect up with our emotions concerning death?

He's right that there is a tension between Le Poidevin's claim and a non-revisionary attitude to our tensed emotions more generally. But his argument doesn't seem to isolate the source of that tension.

Consider again Prior's case of someone thanking goodness that an unpleasant experience (such as a headache) is over. On the B-theory, there is a sense in which nothing is ever over, because nothing is ever past. But B-theorists want to be able to hold that the

¹² Burley 2008a, p. 271.

subject's relief is warranted. So they hold that the subject is thanking goodness for what is believed to be the case, namely that it's over. The relief is warranted, because the belief is warranted. Now consider our fear of post-mortem non-existence. Suppose that on the B-theory, nothing ever really goes out of existence. Burley thinks the same considerations apply here: the subject's fear is warranted because the belief is warranted. The subject is dreading what is believed to be the case, namely that they will cease to exist.

But is the belief that they will cease to exist warranted? In the former case, the reason the tensed belief is warranted (and true) is that the tenseless facts and the evidence concerning them are right. That is, the conclusion of the headache does precede the utterance, and the subject has evidence for this. But now assume that in the latter case, the subject tenselessly exists outside of their life span, and has evidence for this from her metaphysics class. Then the belief isn't either warranted or true.

The reason Burley disagrees is contained in his footnote on how to understand Jo's belief that she will cease to exist. He thinks 'exists' should here be understood 'in its tensed, A-theoretic sense'. This connects up with his later remark that it's 'A-theoretic beliefs, but not B-theoretic ones, that are sufficient to warrant our emotional attitudes', according to the Mellor-MacBeath model.

Jo's belief that she will cease to exist is an A-theoretic one in the sense that it's a (future) tensed belief. But in what sense should 'exist' be understood as tensed, or A-theoretic? Consider ordinary, non-philosophical talk of one's future existence or non-existence. It's reasonable to think that such talk doesn't latch onto the unrestricted sense of 'existence' that is in play in eternalism as usually understood. If someone in a non-philosophical context says 'after my death, I will cease to exist', normal B-theorists will take

that to be true, since the region in which she's spatiotemporally located doesn't include any region after her death. Insofar as her evidence indicates this, her belief will be warranted.

However, what's at issue here is the emotional life of a B-theorist, and in particular, of a B-theorist who shares Le Poidevin's understanding of the B-theory. Now, in many contexts, it may still be reasonable to interpret their belief about future non-existence as being about a lack of spatiotemporal location. But surely it wouldn't be reasonable to insist on interpreting it thus in all contexts. And presumably, what's relevant is the context in which the belief 'I will cease to exist' expresses the (unwarranted) conviction that one will not partake of that ersatz immortality that (one thinks) the fabric of space-time guarantees one. Indeed, in the main text, that seems to be the belief Burley explicitly considers: 'my death will be a passage into oblivion', where 'passage into oblivion' is Le Poidevin's phrase for what death would be if eternalism (as understood by him) was false.

Recall that when considering the case of atheist Jo, Burley deliberately disregards whether she's a B-theorist. So Burley might object that Jo's metaphysical views about time, and Jo's evidence for her views, are irrelevant to the epistemic status of her belief that she will cease to exist. But why think that? After all, on the interpretation of eternalism we are assuming, whether or not Jo will cease to exist depends partly on the metaphysical truth about time. That's what is unique about our fear of death. The "[prevalent B-theoretic account] treats one's metaphysical beliefs about time as being irrelevant to the warrantedness of one's feelings or emotional attitudes", only if those metaphysical beliefs are not relevant to the tensed beliefs the emotions are based on, i.e. only if they don't concern the same subject matter. In this case, they do.

However, as indicated, I think Burley's overall point (that there is a tension with the non-revisionary approach to tensed emotions) is right. Indeed, he may not mean to grant that

there could be an interesting sense of continued existence on the B-theory ('I will grant Le Poidevin [...] that [...] there is some sense in which the person's life never goes out of existence')¹³. The real point of contention concerns Le Poidevin's understanding of the B-theory. What I've said so far depends on a construal of Le Poidevin's thesis that is hard to sustain on closer inspection.

This construal effectively says that the tenseless facts of the case are not what they ordinarily seem. Even at times outside of one's life span, one (tenselessly) exists in some sense. Le Poidevin's remarks suggest that he thinks of both one's life and of oneself as 'eternally real'. If these were the tenseless facts, the relevant tensed belief ('I will cease to exist') would in the right context indeed be unwarranted. The question is, how are we to think of the shadowy (tenseless) existence at times outside one's life span? And what would it even be for one's life to be real (before and) after one's life?

On the one hand, too flimsy a sense of future existence presumably won't be comforting, and hence not relevant to the topic. On the other hand, too robust a sense will threaten to obliterate the particular tenseless facts a common sense B-theorist starts out with. Barring survival as an immortal soul, what could this kind of ersatz immortality amount to? Are we to claim that everyone is alive at all times, and that every process goes on forever? Apart from the obvious implausibility of this idea, we would then face the problem that headaches, too, would seem to go on forever. So Burley's overall point would still stand: we couldn't ever feel warranted emotions concerning the pastness or futurity of events, because no events ever would be (entirely) past or future – not because fundamentally, there'd be no

¹³ Burley 2008a, p. 262. Burley may agree, since in another publication he discusses this point (Burley 2008b). There, he distinguishes between alethic and ontic eternalism. The latter is the obviously implausible view I discuss in the next paragraph, which he too dismisses. The former is the view that there are eternal truths (e.g. that one existed), which he rightly says is not exclusive to the B-theory. He also discusses the prospects of a potential third view, factual eternalism, which he takes to collapse into ontic eternalism : there are eternal facts (about one's life). I agree that this by itself doesn't constitute a genuine alternative; however, in the next section I sketch what I take to be a genuinely distinct, albeit elusive, view in the vicinity.

tensed facts (though there wouldn't), but because the fundamental tenseless facts would falsify all tensed beliefs except those of the form 'event e is present' (for all actual events).

Is Le Poidevin's view a non-starter then? In the final section, I want to sketch an interpretation of it that would accommodate the underlying intuition that there is a sense of eternal existence relevant to the fear of death.

5 An interpretation of Le Poidevin's B-theory

The B-theory is often characterised as a view that treats time as on a par with space. The eternalist tenet says that just like all spatial locations exist, so do all temporal ones (including their contents). The rejection of properties like presentness or pastness is mirrored by a rejection of properties like being here or being over there. And the rejection of fundamental tensed facts has its correlate in the position that fundamentally, there are no spatially perspectival facts like 'this is the UK'. The basic idea is that times, like spatial locations, are to be treated as equal in one's metaphysics – none of them is in any way privileged, and which ones are past or future is a matter of temporal perspective.

So it's not surprising to find spatial metaphors being used in this context. Arguably, the locution 'temporal location' itself has spatial connotations, and eternalism is sometimes informally described as the view that times are 'out there'. For most B-theorists, this is a useful analogy – but no more. Times aren't really 'out there', i.e. themselves in some kind of space. It's not that all of time exists at once, in a totum simul. It's that it all exists, simpliciter.

Now suppose we subtract these last cautionary remarks from the B-theoretic story. One way to make sense of Le Poidevin's remarks, I think, is to think of time as quasi-spatial,

and of times as existing ‘at once’. So presumably there’d also be a second temporal* realm, in which our quasi-spatial temporal dimension and its contents would be present*.

Consider for a moment the moving spotlight view, an eternalist A-theory. On this view, the past, present and future exist equally, but they become present (and then more and more past) successively. The usual explication of what this process makes use of primitive tense operators: it will be the case that the objective present is located at a later time (than *t*, the time it’s at). The moving spotlighthouse may then also mention the metaphor of super-time as a fictional aid to the understanding (e.g. Skow 2012). On one version of the view, the idea is that the italicised tensed fact above is to be understood as the claim that relative to some Later super-time (than *T*, which represents how things are), the objective present is at a later time. The view can be interpreted as involving an A-theoretically persisting B-theoretic time dimension (Pooley 2013): all times exist now, they have existed, and they will exist. What changes, first and foremost, is which of them is objectively present. As Pooley says, ‘eternalism’ is an apt label for this view.

How does this compare to the view I’m attributing to Poidevin? Unlike super-time, which according to the moving spotlighthouse is merely a fiction, the second temporal* realm would be real. And unlike the moving spotlight view, Le Poidevin’s doesn’t involve an objective present, tensed facts, or temporal passage – at least not in ordinary time. In fact, it probably doesn’t involve any of these things in the second temporal* realm either. It’s not that there is a second temporal dimension that is A-theoretic, and in which time* passes, even if time doesn’t pass in ours. Rather, the distinction between past*, present*, and future* is obliterated. Since all of our time is nonetheless thought of as present*, this in turn suggests that the second temporal* realm consists not of an extended dimension like ours, but of a single time* point (an ‘eternal present*’).

This is an elusive view. Perhaps the most serious problem is that it's not clear exactly how to think of the second temporal* 'realm', or why it deserves to be called 'temporal*'. A related problem is that it's not clear how the two realms relate, or how the view avoids tensed* facts. Recall the obviously crazy view rejected in the last section. How does this view fare better? If I say that Socrates doesn't exist now, what ensures the truth of my claim? Ordinarily it's the tenseless fact about his existence at certain times BC and the temporal location of my utterance. But now there seems to be a rival fact threatening to make the claim false instead, namely that he (like all actual entities) exists now*.

However, the view now under consideration doesn't posit obviously implausible tenseless facts, i.e. an ordinary temporal dimension with crazy content. Instead, it adds an elusive second temporal* realm to an ordinary temporal dimension with reasonable content. What keeps our ordinary tensed talk true (when it is) is that it concerns time, rather than time*.

Suppose one buys all this; is it comforting? And even if it is, doesn't Burley's point then re-appear, because for the same reason, past headaches are still troubling? Let's take these in order. I do think such a view could be comforting to someone who believed it (leaving aside now whether anyone should believe it). We're not as bothered about spatial distance as about temporal distance. Knowing that someone is out there, at this time, is comforting in a way that it isn't to think of them as existing here, at some time. So thinking of time as more than analogous to space, as quasi-spatial, could allow one to be glad about someone's past but present* existence. And the same goes for one's own future non-existence.

Burley's point now threatens to re-appear, but it's no longer decisive. There is room for a sentiment pulling in the opposite direction of one's fear of death, where there isn't room

for the analogous sentiment in areas not concerning mortality. Why care if a past headache ‘continues’ to exist in a second temporal* realm? By contrast, I might well care if such existence ‘awaits’ myself and others after death. I’m putting ‘awaits’ in quotation marks because like ‘continues’ it clearly has temporal connotations, and as far as (ordinary) temporal reality is concerned, all that awaits is non-existence. So the attenuating positive sentiment in question isn’t itself a tensed emotion. Rather, it’s gladness that we’re all (‘already’, or at least also) part of a realm that transcends temporality, and that that state of affairs obtains independently of when one exists in time (and whether that existence lies in the relative past of this discussion). Of course all this can’t remove a fear of non-existence, much less sadness over other people’s. But perhaps, for some, it can help attenuate or transform those emotions.

In my interpretation of Le Poidevin, I’ve emphasized B-theoretic elements. I think one reason he makes his remarks about the B-theory, rather than about eternalism in general, is that he, like many B-theorists, takes the passing of time to be an experiential illusion. Indeed, he thinks that even change and motion are to a large extent projected by the mind. On the resulting view, the world is strikingly different from how it appears to us. In particular, it’s rather less changeable, and less dynamic. (Incidentally, it’s not clear to me that B-theorists should claim any of this (for contrary views, see e.g. Savitt 2002, Oaklander 2012, Leininger 2013, Deng 2013, Mozersky 2015, Frischhut 2013, Hoerl 2014). But many B-theorists do, and that version of the B-theory is widely endorsed.¹⁴) And while that version of the B-theory isn’t as elusive as the view I’ve sketched, the two do have certain similarities. They share the idea that time doesn’t pass, and that in some sense, there is an unchanging reality below the surface of ordinary temporal experience. These similarities seem reflected in the following remark Einstein made shortly after the death of his friend Michele Besso: ‘Now he has also gone ahead of me a little in departing from this peculiar world. This means nothing. For us

¹⁴ See (Prosser 2012) and (Paul 2010) for more B-theoretic explanations of an illusory experience of time as passing.

believing physicists, the division between past, present and future has only the significance of a stubbornly persistent illusion.’¹⁵ (Of course, given what I’ve been arguing, I take this to be about a deeper level of reality that doesn’t impugn tensed beliefs about tomorrow’s weather.)

I suspect it’s this feature of the B-theory (as usually understood) that leads Le Poidevin to suggest that a metaphysical view of time has the potential to function as something like a religion.¹⁶ To the mind of a contemporary metaphysician, that’s an alien thought. But it’s not implausible that one of the comforts of theism, for those who do find it comforting, is that it offers an ‘antidote to our dismay at the transience of all natural things... Everything that we see passes away, but God is eternal and unchanging’.¹⁷ Even on a less traditional conception of God’s relation to time, one of theism’s comforts may derive from its positing an entity that is a lot less changeable than other things. For example, even if a theist thinks God is in time and subject to change, they’ll typically also think neither his/her love nor his/her existence are, or even could be, subject to change.

Admittedly, it’s not clear how much work is done here by the lack of change; whether an unchanging reality underlying the appearances is comforting rather depends on the nature of that reality (imagine a permanently vengeful omnipotent deity). But perhaps the reality posited by the view I’ve sketched would qualify, in spite of the mixed contents of our temporal dimension (including not only headaches but real horrors). If so, then on that view, atheists

¹⁵ ‘Nun ist er mir auch mit dem Abschied von dieser sonderbaren Welt ein wenig vorausgegangen. Dies bedeutet nichts. Für uns gläubige Physiker hat die Scheidung zwischen Vergangenheit, Gegenwart und Zukunft nur die Bedeutung einer wenn auch hartnäckigen Illusion.’ (Einstein 1972, p. 538; my translation)

¹⁶ Le Poidevin 1996, p. 146.

¹⁷ Le Poidevin 1996, p. 135.

“need not be dismayed by the apparent transience of everything [they] value, for if the passage of time is an illusion, such things are eternally real. And death is no longer the passage into oblivion: it is simply one of the temporal limits of our lives.”^{18 19}

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¹⁸ Le Poidevin 1996, p. 145-6.

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