

## Space in Situation

By Yann Flipo

Space in general is not the timeless frame, the Kantian *a priori* form, we all have in mind, but, in fact, it never extends beyond our current present.

### When Is Our Current Present?

The fact that our perception of the present, past, and future remains vivid after so much discourse on the illusion of time suggests that the perception has as much *raison d'être* as the supposed reality or unreality of time. It thus seems appropriate to set aside the duality of psychological illusion vs. physical reality to speak rather in terms of configuration, or, to borrow from continental philosophy, in terms of *dispositif* (apparatus). Our starting point is thus a neutral utterance: on the human scale, our experience of time is linear.

From there, a philosophical question arises which is one of actuality: when is the present situated? Is it in 1871? In 10,000 BC? In 2019? And the same question seems to apply, only with a broader date range, to the age of the universe itself.

For its part, philosophical *presentism*<sup>1</sup> postulates that “only events and entities occurring in the present exist.” There is doubtless much to say about the somewhat problematic use of the verb “to exist” here. Is this to say that past existence has no status, or even is a contradiction in terms? This could possibly be postulated for future existence, insofar as it is wholly unpredictable, but it seems decidedly open to dispute to refer to the past as nothingness, as non-existence, on the grounds that the events involved have left the theatre of operations. Yet if we allow the word “exist” to stand, it remains the case that the presentist proposition immediately opens up the further question of *what* present is meant, and that is doubtless why the postulate contains an implicit presupposition. What it means in fact is that “only events and entities occurring in the *current* present exist.”

This change in terms raises the crucial question of the existence of the current presence, i.e., knowing whether time is tensed or tenseless in the terms of John McTaggart and his A-series (past, present, and future objectives) and B-series (a perspectivist conception of time with events that precede, follow, or are simultaneous with each other).<sup>2</sup> In other words, the question is “how do we know now is now” (David Braddon-Mitchell) or “when am I?” (Craig Bourne).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Not to be confused with presentism in a societal sense, which most of the time is not a conception, but a value judgment on (unintended) short-term vision, lack of cultural awareness, forgetting the lessons of history, etc. (although the despising of history and the glorification of present times has sometimes become a doctrine – see, for instance, futurism or Dadaism).

<sup>2</sup> J. McTaggart, “The Unreality of Time,” *Mind* 17, no. 68 (1908): 475-74.

<sup>3</sup> D. Braddon-Mitchell, “How Do We Know Now Is Now,” *Analysis* 64, no. 3 (2004): 199-203; C. Bourne, “When Am I? A Tense Time for Some Tense Theorists?” *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 80 (2002): 359-71.

These are good questions; the answers given by presentist philosophers, who logically come down on the side of A-series, are hesitant, to say the least, without ever managing to demonstrate the *nowness* of the present. McTaggart, it would seem, looked for actuality all his life without finding it.

We may suspect that the problem again arises from the postulate, since affirming that “only events and entities occurring in the [current] present exist” by no means prevents the verb from being conjugated as, for example “only events and entities that occurred in the [then current] past existed.” As such, it is clear that the problem is no nearer to a solution. There is clearly a form of incoherence here: conjugation has no built-in cursor, while presentism presupposes that such a cursor does exist.

Yet, if actuality is not demonstrated, then the “events and entities occurring in the present” in fact occur everywhere in time, i.e., never. Let us make sure no such thing happens, and, for that purpose, let us explore this lexical field and what we refer to as the present.

We know that the word *present* has two meanings. The first is temporal: the present moment. The second is spatial: that which is not absent, which occupies space, which takes place.

This homonymy should intrigue. Is this merely a trick of language to refer to two things that exist in discrete categories, or are they linked by something other than language? The question may initially appear somewhat distant, precisely because we have two separate categories in mind. This is the Kantian way.

### **From Kantian Space to Space in Situation**

Indeed, we spontaneously separate the concepts of time and space. Whether we consider them physically or geometrically, we can easily conceive of space without time, for example, when we contemplate something (as long, of course, as it does not co-occur with a meditation on time...) or simply when we think of physical or geometric space in general terms. Conversely, we can easily conceive of time without space: our notion of the past, present, and future, in other terms, our sense of duration (and, beyond that, of history) is the spontaneous equivalent of separating off the concept of time.

This Kantian geography of space and time (the famous “a priori forms of our representations”) seems to be our impassable horizon, even after a century of space-time.

Indeed, physics, which produced the concept that is such a source of intimidation for presentists (and philosophers in general), does not separate the two concepts. However, it is entirely feasible to consider the universe objectively without taking account of any observer, as scientists do when they calculate the age of the universe, and as others do more poetically when discussing God’s point of view (in both cases with light from all stars at certain points in its travel...)

If this is our supposition, the separation of the concepts of time and space immediately becomes relevant once more, such that it can be affirmed that space-time is *based* on this initial separation rather than cancelling it out, and that in the end, the two cohabit perfectly.

Therefore, whatever the case of space-time as a sort of phenomenology of the universe, there is an equally significant intuitive experience in which time is linear and the concepts are separate.

Yet the problem of this separation, which seems so natural to us, is that it does not reflect reality – not of space-time, but of space itself, and consequently of time, as will be shown below.

So, let us take our eyes off the Kantian maps and examine the idea stated in our foreword, that space could in fact lie within the perfect frontiers of a current present.

However, to explain our current truncated vision, we must now return to a concrete, pre-Kantian understanding of space. It will be shown that the conclusion we will arrive at is valid both for physical space and abstract space, though the demonstration requires a return to the concrete.

Let us, therefore, attempt to leave behind geometry and consider space as Descartes and Leibniz did, as space *occupied* by that which exists. We know that Descartes denied the existence of space prior to that which occupies its own space: “For in fact the names ‘place’ or ‘space’ do not signify anything different from the body which is said to be in the place.”<sup>4</sup> Following on from Descartes, Leibniz similarly deduced the space of the notion of place. Place does not necessarily pre-exist matter; rather it is a deduced notion, the place occupied by a given thing: “space is what results from places taken together.”<sup>5</sup> Even Spinoza maintained this understanding of space, albeit while imbuing it with considerable divine value.

Note that this logically implies the rejection of the idea of the void: in other words, as Alexandre Koyré writes, “if God should destroy the world, there would be no void space left behind.”<sup>6</sup> Therefore, let us consider for the moment the space occupied and nothing more, not as a container, but as a sort of result of that which “takes place.” Of that which is present.

Bearing this *induced* space in mind, let us turn to a question that may appear incongruous, but whose response may provide us with some clues as to why the word “present” has two meanings. The question is: does this necessarily occupied space (in other words, the universe and the place it occupies) have a place in time?

The response may be rather surprising, given that, as we have just seen, it is masked by the framework of our thoughts, which spontaneously separate the concepts of space

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<sup>4</sup> R. Descartes, *Principia Philosophiae*, Part. II (Amsterdam: Danielem Elzevirium, 1644).

<sup>5</sup> Leibniz-Clarke correspondence, 1715-16.

<sup>6</sup> A. Koyré, *Du monde clos à l'univers infini* (1957; repr., Paris: Gallimard, 2003).

and time. It is that space occupies wholly and uniquely a present, thereby rendering the present universal and current.

Indeed, does space extend beyond the present? Does it not perfectly match its extent?

To convince yourself, please take any object around you: does it extend beyond the present? Take yourself, do you extend beyond? Then move from the particular to the general, which is space: does it extend beyond the present?

Let us call it space *in situation* as opposed to our spontaneous understanding of it, intrinsically separate from time.<sup>7</sup>

### **Not an Eternalism**

The present is fashionable. Contemporary spirituality has put it on a pedestal, aiming to drive home the message that everything that happens is in the present, that we cannot step outside the present, that we should trust “the power of now,”<sup>8</sup> and so on. This is doubtless as it should be: at least attempts are being made stir to the “spiritual awakening” that has taken up the torch of Greek *ataraxia* and borne it to unexpected new heights.

Yet this New Age presentism, as it might be described, hardly seeks to identify the boundaries of the present, giving rise to the perpetual temptation to derealize time, to detemporalize the present.

Identifying the boundaries of the present as those of space and vice versa, as the present article does, on the contrary, returns the prerogatives of the (current) present, and consequently of the past and future. Now that actuality is fixed, we are able to say that the event “Julius Caesar crosses the Rubicon” both exists (as presentism would put it) and belongs to the past, that it had its actuality, and that it no longer has it (all things that presentism could not specify, whichever way we take it!)

To achieve this result, our only choice was to deconstruct the mental habit of intuitively seeing the present as a simple limit and space as a dissociated frame. In the absence of this deconstruction, presentism could only *decree* the actuality of the present or be doomed to a circular argument; whereas situating space in the present *induces* actuality, so that while we can still conjugate tenses, at least we know the standpoint we are conjugating from, since if the present were not (filled with) the universe itself, why would it, rather than a different one, be the current present? The universe cannot be both 1 million and 13 million years old: it has a current age, a current situation.

Therefore, “reality takes place in the current present” is doubtless a more satisfactory presentist utterance. This present – neither timeless, nor an unsituatable and

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<sup>7</sup> To conclude this step in our reasoning, let us note, as anticipated, that while the Cartesian identification of space and matter has helped us to conceive of this space in situation, it also conversely applies to geometrical space.

<sup>8</sup> E. Tolle, *The Power of Now* (Vancouver: Namaste, 1997).

ungraspable theoretical limit – is current in itself and present in both senses of the word, the homonymy reflecting reality.

This “present-present” sheds new light on the nature of time itself: there is not one nature, but two. Time is no longer a chimera, a metaphysical absolute or an illusion engendered by the brain,<sup>9</sup> but (at least in our reality, in the “temporal” world, as it used to be referred to) a precise and necessary configuration of abstraction (past and present) and of presence, of “there is.”

In our temporal reality, there is movement and (apparent) immobility, and therefore, an abstract past and future of bodies, whether immobile or in movement.

A body is thus by definition present in the two meanings of the term. As we have seen, it is an essential property of any body, object, form, or space itself never to extend into the past or the future. A body necessarily exists in the present; the present is what encloses its form, so to speak. And conversely, time necessarily involves bodies. The physical state presupposes the abstractions of before and after.

The space in situation alters our mental framework such that the universe suddenly appears to us as if suspended or “encapsulated” between the abstracts of past and future. It is somewhat as if we were rediscovering the closed space from before the infinite universe of the scientific revolution, to borrow Alexandre Koyré’s term once more,<sup>10</sup> but this time space is no longer closed by itself (if this could be said to mean anything), but by time.

### **We Are Still Very Much Attached to Our Immanent Frame**

We see that every new scientific discovery further seems to unveil the rationality and intelligibility of the real, its mathematical structure, and its ever finer tuning. Therefore, as the artificiality of the real progresses, its “naturalness” logically regresses.

But in the first instance, has this idea of nature not largely been dependent on our common understanding of space as a timeless frame? This frame has been called “immanence”: the idea of nature slotted into it and unfurled majestically across it like a landscape. Space *in situation*, on the other hand, seems incompatible with this notion of immanence, and it reveals a reality that is more *sustained*, as if embedded, and more Heraclitean.

On the one hand, we should be alright with the idea of nature shrinking away to nothing, because this is what we wanted.

It is indeed striking to note that late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century writers thought of themselves in terms of a *struggle* against nature. Romain Rolland, a pacifist French writer awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1915, remarked as an aside in

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<sup>9</sup> Albeit that our experience of duration is well explained by science. Briefly: within two to three seconds, our brains synchronize and homogenize various stimuli to create an impression of movement and flux, giving rise to a coherent experience of the self and the world.

<sup>10</sup> Koyré, *Du monde clos*.

an interview discussing the flood of inventions that marked the turn of the century that “the lightning-fast rapprochement technology has created between all the peoples of the earth [will make them] unite in the fruitful daily struggle against nature and old injustices.”<sup>11</sup> Jules Michelet powerfully summed this up when he argued that “with the world there started a war that must finish with the world and not before: that of man against nature, of mind against matter, of liberty against destiny.”<sup>12</sup> It would, in fact, be interesting to establish at what point this struggle to the death began. Whatever the case, it is equally striking that not only are we no longer aware of it, but also we do not see that ecological disasters are the consequences of this struggle, rather than of our negligence or even carelessness as regards nature.<sup>13</sup>

But on the other hand, we are still deeply attached to nature and immanence, even reduced to a mere simulacrum, a simple *interface*. We are still attached to a simulacrum of immemoriality. This is probably why the Kantian space prerequisite still has some beautiful days ahead; only they are perhaps numbered.

For if the idea of nature is dear to us, who, on the other hand, truly likes infinite space? Who is alright with this “circle whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere” (Pascal) and where “all determinate places” are “denied” (Kepler)?

Yet if all of space is enclosed in the present, then deep space, infinite space, suddenly looks less horrific: again, it is as if we got an ancient *sphere* back!

And from there, the separation between atmosphere and outer space almost seems like an internal frontier that will prove one day secondary, like a fortified city whose fortifications become obsolete as the city grows open and free.

In this (long-term) perspective of un-hostile space, and since open societies are generally more prosperous than closed societies, it is likely that we will indeed benefit from abundant space resources (regardless of the question of other civilizations). And this is raising numerous philosophical questions, such as, what to build? Colonies? New worlds? Earth suburbs? Far Wests?

Will we disperse in space or converge in megacities like we do on earth? Will there be new countries, new states, or will we go back to feudality? Also, will we stem the decline in fertility rate and start having more children again? Will we remain capitalists or will abundance make us share everything with everyone?

Will we look at earth as our home or just a territory among others? Will space be viewed as the garden of earth or earth as the courtyard of space?

And, perhaps more importantly, what about *spiritual* abundance?

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<sup>11</sup> Interview recording, *Anthologie sonore de la pensée française* (Paris: Frémeaux & Associés).

<sup>12</sup> J. Michelet, *Introduction à l'histoire universelle* (Paris: Hachette, 1831).

<sup>13</sup> This is indeed proof that, in line with Heidegger's well-founded intuition, we have been dispossessed of the struggle by the technology so naively referred to by Romain Rolland, and that, as such, we should perhaps be considering the Industrial Revolution as the moment the baton was handed over, and the Cartesian interlude of mastery and possession came to a close.

It seems that if the present is (along with an ego-free life) the gateway to spiritual awakening (see the abundant literature on the matter), then the fact that all of space is encapsulated in the present is certainly a worthwhile subject of meditation.

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**About the Author:** Born in 1973, Yann Flipo studied philosophy at the Sorbonne. He currently works in the finance department of British Telecom in Paris. He has published a few articles in French literary journals, and he has recently become interested in spirituality.

**Editors' Notes:** Our author, Mr. Yann Flipo, has given us an important essay on the illusion and reality distinctions involved with time and space of the universe. He questions our mental representation of space, and, in consequence, the relation between space and the present. He ends his essay with some important philosophical research questions related to the future of human exploration, development and settlements in Space. They are all relevant to our work within the issues of the *Journal of Space Philosophy*. **Bob Krone and Gordon Arthur.**