

The best way to judge this disagreement, and say what philosophy is about and by what means it proceeds, is to contemplate a sample philosophical problem. For the reasons explained in the preceding chapter, it was not until the nineteenth century that it made sense to ask for an example of a philosophical problem, as opposed to a problem of some other kind; even now there could easily be disputes over whether one or another particular problem was genuinely a philosophical one or not. But there are paradigm cases of problems that everyone would agree are philosophical in character. One is this: Does time really pass? Some may say that it evidently does: the world changes as new events occur; these events formerly lay in the future, and will in due time be over and recede into the past. But some deny that time passes in this sense. There are temporal relations between events—certain events temporally precede others—but this is all there is to time: its being a dimension on which events have different locations.

This is plainly a philosophical disagreement. It is indeed a metaphysical disagreement: it concerns the nature, not of the human mind or human behavior, but of external reality. Faced with such a disagreement, how does a philosopher proceed? He may begin by asking the believers in the passage of time to clarify their view. What, he may ask, do they think that there is? Some may reply that what is yet to be *is* not, and that what has ceased to be *is* not: all there *is* is what exists now. Does this mean, he inquires, that statements about what will happen or about how things formerly were are neither true nor false? For, he urges, a statement can be true only if there is something in virtue of which it is true: so, if all there is is what exists now, no statement about the future or about the past can be true. Some may enthusiastically agree. Reality, they say, is ever-changing. The only true statements are those that represent reality as it is, that is, as it is *now*; there can be no truths about how it will be or how it was.

Other believers in the passage of time may give a more temperate response. They may urge that the philosopher is forgetting that the verb “to be” has tenses. If it be asked what there is, in the present tense, the answer must be restricted to the present moment; but there are also answers to the questions of what there will be and what there has been. The principle that a statement can be true only if there is something in virtue of which it is true overlooks the tensed nature of the verb “to be”: it should be true “only if there is, will be, or has been something in virtue of which it is true.” What, then, differentiates such a view from that of those who deny the passage of time? the philosopher asks. Those people leave out of their description of reality an essential fact, he is told, namely, that certain of the events ordered by temporal sequence are occurring *now*.

The skeptic replies that the question “Which event is happening now?” merely asks which event is simultaneous with the asking of the question, which is itself just another event. No, his opponent answers. When a painful experience has ceased and I exclaim, “Thank God that’s over,” I am not rejoicing in a mere relation of temporal precedence, he says, for I knew in advance that I should say, “Thank God that’s over,” and that my saying it would take place only after the experience had come to an end. All that means, the opponent of temporal passage retorts, is that your feeling of relief followed, rather than preceded, the end of the painful experience: it is still just a matter of temporal sequence.

The believer in the passage of time may now object that his opponent is spatializing time, treating it as just one more dimension in addition to the three of space. That, he says, abolishes time, since it does not allow the reality of changes, whereas change is of the essence of time. His opponent replies that he does recognize change: there is change whenever a true proposition is converted into a false one by replacing some temporal specification occurring in it with a different one. “That’s just what I mean,” the defender

of the passage of time may exclaim: “you could define ‘spatial change’ by substituting ‘specification of place’ for ‘temporal specification’; but the fact that there is grass at this place and none a kilometer away does not involve that any change has occurred or is occurring.” “That is contrary to the way we talk,” it may be retorted; we say such things as “The terrain changes to the east of the spot.” “Only because we imagine ourselves traveling in that direction,” the other replies.

We need not follow the debate over this well-known philosophical dispute any further; taken only so far, it adequately illustrates the character of the philosophical argument. The dispute certainly concerns reality: according to the view anyone takes concerning it, he will conceive of the world in one way or the other. But the matter is not one to be settled by empirical means: scientific theory may bear on it—for example, it is relevant that, according to special relativity, simultaneity is relative to a frame of reference. But science could not resolve the dispute: no observation could establish that one or the other side was right. A philosopher will seek either to show that one of the disputants is right and the other wrong, perhaps after some further clarification of the two views, or else to dissolve the dispute by showing both sides to be victims of some conceptual confusion. Philosophy is indeed concerned with reality, but not to discover new facts about it: it seeks to improve our understanding of what we already know. It does not seek to observe more, but to clarify our vision of what we see. Its aim is, in Wittgenstein’s phrase, to help us to see the world aright.

Whether the philosopher claims to have solved a problem or to have dissolved it as a pseudo-problem, he will proceed by rational argument. Philosophy shares with mathematics the peculiarity that it does not appeal to any new sources of information, but relies solely upon reasoning on the basis of what we already know. It differs from mathematics in that it prefers muddy territory. Mathema-