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## Knife-Edge and Saddleback: Augustine & William James on the Psychology of the Specious Present

Sean Hannan<sup>1</sup>

In the late nineteenth century, William James raised the possibility that an ill-defined notion of ‘the present time’ might cause problems for future psychologists. This line of inquiry ultimately took James in a sanguine direction, as he convinced himself and many others that, even if our notion of the now remains fuzzy, we should proceed on the basis of whatever vague sense of the present seems appropriate for our clinical or experimental purposes. Almost fifteen hundred years before James, this same question of a specious present was asked by the Christian author Augustine of Hippo as part of an introspective interrogation of time in his *Confessions*. Augustine’s findings were less sanguine. The present, it turns out, is hard for us to define because it has no proper definition. In other words: the ‘now’ is not natural to time. And if that is the case, then time-bound animals like human beings would also be subject to a time without present. To try to describe the human psyche and diagnose its maladies while relying upon the idea of a specious present could cause us to mis-describe and misdiagnose the very phenomena we seek to explain or even heal. We thus find Augustine and James at odds over the specious present. In order to adjudicate their dispute, we should proceed by sketching out James’ psychological remarks and then positioning Augustine’s philosophical account against James. Once that has been done, we can try to nod in the direction of a way forward by introducing a third perspective, here tentatively termed ‘phenomenological,’ but originally rooted in the empirical psychology of James’ contemporary from the continent: Franz Brentano.

### William James & the Specious Present

In texts like 1890’s *Principles of Psychology*, James’ approach to temporal experience is characterized by certain well-known turns of phrase, not least of all the “stream of thought.”<sup>2</sup> At first, this makes it seem as though what James is after is pure duration or something like the flux of Heraclitus. “Within each personal consciousness,” James writes, “thought is always changing.”<sup>3</sup> But what does it mean for thought to change?<sup>4</sup> Are we talking about a kind of dynamic chaos, a mixed-up flux that could only later be divided into discrete pieces of thought? Or does the stream of thought already flow – however counterintuitively – in ‘chunks?’ It is this choppy flow that seems to fit best with James’ account of

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<sup>2</sup> Many of the relevant James passages on time-consciousness can be found in Valtteri Arstila and Dan Lloyd, eds., *Subjective Time: the Philosophy, Psychology, and Neuroscience of Temporality* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2014), 3-23. See also Holly Andersen, “The Development of the ‘Specious Present,’” in Arstila and Lloyd, 25-42.

<sup>3</sup> William James, *The Principles of Psychology*, Volume 1 (Mineola NY: Dover, 2012), 225. For a general overview, see John G. Benjafield, *A History of Psychology* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2015), 85-88.

<sup>4</sup> James, *Principles*, 620, reduces the experience of time to the experience of change, arguing that we cannot really perceive ‘empty time.’ Cf. Arstila and Lloyd, eds., *Subjective Time*, 15. This reduction of time to change was also a live option in antiquity, although it is not clear that Aristotle or Augustine ever went quite so far.

consciousness as a sequence of mental states.<sup>5</sup> “No state,” James writes just a few pages later, “once gone, can recur and be identical with what it was before.”<sup>6</sup> This claim preserves the apparent novelty of mental experience and frees James’ psychology of the threat of recurring ideas (and the bad ‘metaphysical’ air surrounding such things), but it runs up against other problems. The most pressing of these problems is that of the temporal boundaries of a ‘present mental state.’

James next emphasizes the fact that the stream of consciousness must be “without breach, crack, or division.”<sup>7</sup> This is what makes the image of the stream so fitting, whereas “chain” and “train of thought” are inappropriate, since they cast mental states as discrete entities merely linked together in some artificial manner.<sup>8</sup> This misses the organic character of the flux. Up to this point, James’ description of consciousness lines up with Aristotle’s *Physics* IV, where time is approached not just as the ‘number of motion,’ but more fundamentally as a *sunecheia*: a continuum. Aristotle further suggests that time is not so unlike a line: just as a line is not really made up of a bunch of points blurred together, so time is not made up of a bunch of ‘nows’ blurred together.<sup>9</sup> James’ stream of consciousness seems to be getting at something similar when it comes to temporal experience, although his later comments about the specious present might belie the purity of the continuum at which he is hinting here.<sup>10</sup>

Already in the preface to the *Principles*, James had written: “I have [...] treated our passing thoughts as integers, and regarded the mere laws of their coexistence with brain-states as the ultimate laws for our science.”<sup>11</sup> Such mathematical turns of phrase call us back to Aristotle’s use of the geometric line to explain the time-line. James is implying that our thoughts do pass – as the ‘sensible continuity’ of the stream of thought demands<sup>12</sup> – but they do so like numbers in a sequence rather than a Heraclitean river. All the same, James concedes that “the changes from one moment to another in the quality of the consciousness are never absolutely abrupt.”<sup>13</sup> Note the word choice again: Jamesian mutability operates on the assumption of integer-like ‘moments’ that ‘stack up’ in order to create the – timeline of

<sup>5</sup> Arstila and Lloyd, *Subjective Time*, contains a whole section called “Choppy Streams of Consciousness,” 159-198.

<sup>6</sup> James, *Principles*, 1.230.

<sup>7</sup> James, *Principles*, 1.237.

<sup>8</sup> On “train” or “chain” of thought, see Benjafield, *History*, 86; Arstila and Lloyd, eds., *Subjective Time*, 5-6; and James, *Principles*, 1.239-241. Related to this is James’ terminology of ‘substantive’ versus ‘transitive’ mental states. The former ‘rest’ in their easily describable intentional contents; the latter ‘slide’ from content to content, thereby embodying the relations between contents. Unfortunately, this differential ‘relationality’ itself is near-impossible to describe, perhaps since it is that which allows the substantive contents to gain their differentiated, relational meaning in the first place. The question of how deeply the process of differentiation or discrimination is involved in transitive thought is treated by James in *Principles*, 1.495.

<sup>9</sup> See Aristotle, *Physics*, trans. P.H. Wicksteed and F.M. Cornford (Cambridge MA: Harvard UP, 1929-1934), 4:10-11, alongside 6:1. See also Richard Sorabji, *Philosophy of the Commentators, 200-600 AD*, Vol. 2 (Ithaca NY: Cornell UP, 2005), 190.

<sup>10</sup> On the possibility of self-contradiction in the psychology of the specious present, see Andersen, “Development,” 25-26, who quotes Wilfrid Sellars’ remark that James’ doctrine is “an incoherent combination of literal simultaneity and literal successiveness.”

<sup>11</sup> James, *Principles*, 1.vi-vii; cf. Arstila and Lloyd, eds., *Subjective Time*, 3.

<sup>12</sup> On thought as “sensibly continuous,” see: James, *Principles*, 1.236-237; Arstila and Lloyd, *Subjective Time*, 4-5.

<sup>13</sup> James, *Principles*, 1.237, cf. *Subjective Time*, 5.

consciousness.<sup>14</sup> It was this very ‘stackability,’ however, that Aristotle doubted as a constituent component of continuity in the first place.

On our approach to the specious present, let us pass through one of James’ idiosyncratic thought-experiments: that of the ‘smooth ball sliding under rubber.’ As James describes it, we must begin with a concise but controversial thought:<sup>15</sup>

‘I am the same I that I was yesterday.’ Each of the numbers 1 through 9 stands for a particular *instant* in the process [of having this thought of self-continuity]. If we make a solid wooden frame with the sentence written on its front, and the time-scale on one of its sides, [...] spread flatly a sheet of [...] rubber over its top, on which rectangular coordinates are painted, and slide a smooth ball under the rubber in the direction from 0 to ‘yesterday,’ the bulging of the membrane along this diagonal at successive moments will symbolize the changing of the thought’s content. [...] Or, to express it in cerebral terms, it will show the relative intensities, at successive *moments*, of the several nerve processes to which the various parts of the thought object correspond.

Note once more the use of the terms “instant” and “moment” to describe a thought experiment aimed at emphasizing continuity of motion. A properly continuous account of the stream of consciousness should interrogate these terms, which suggest a discrete present phase. Yet James refrains. His reason is not that he has any argument for the scientifically verifiable reality of the present moment, but simply that the assumption of discrete phases of time does not trouble his overall picture of quasi-continuity in the stream of consciousness.

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<sup>14</sup> James’ language wanders in the direction of a ‘momentary timeline’ in *Principles*, 1.629: “If we represent the actual time-stream of our thinking by an horizontal line, the thought of the stream or of any segment of its length, past, present, or to come, might be figured in a perpendicular raised upon the horizontal at a certain point. The length of this perpendicular stands for a certain object or content, which in this case is the time thought of, and all of which is thought of together at the actual moment of the stream upon which the perpendicular is raised.” Here too the specious present takes on some bizarre-sounding qualities: “we must suppose that this amount of duration [i.e., 12 seconds] is pictured fairly steadily in each passing instant of consciousness by virtue of some fairly constant feature in the brain-process to which the consciousness is tied. This feature of the brain-process, whatever it be, must be the cause of our perceiving the fact of time at all. [...] [T]he specious present, the intuited duration, stands permanent, like the rainbow on the waterfall, with its own quality unchanged by the events that stream through it.” See also *ibid.*, 631: “The original paragon and prototype of all conceived times is the specious present, the short duration of which we are immediately and incessantly sensible.” James next admits that he is not quite sure what kind of “brain-process” could be responsible for constituting the specious present as the lens for our temporal experience. (This can be compared to the collapse of Husserl’s phenomenology of time-consciousness into an absolute time-constituting flux, which would allow time to be experienced by us via a living present.) See again the summary in *ibid.*, 642: “Let me sum up, now, by saying that we are constantly conscious of a certain duration – the specious present – varying in length from a few seconds to probably not more than a minute, and that this duration (with its content perceived as having one part earlier and the other part later) is the original intuition of time. Longer times are conceived by adding, shorter ones by dividing, portions of this vaguely bounded unit, and are habitually thought by us symbolically. Kant’s notion of an intuition of objective time as an infinite necessary continuum has nothing to support it. That duration is rather the object of the intuition which, being realized at every moment of such duration, must be due to a permanently present cause. This cause—probably the simultaneous presence of brain-processes of different phase-fluctuates; and hence a certain range of variation in the amount of the intuition, and in its subdivisibility, accrues.”

<sup>15</sup> James, *Principles*, 1.283; Benjafield, *History*, 87, provides a helpful visualization. Italics mine.

As it turns out, James' treatment of the present time is in general characterized by disdain for the paradoxes which so plagued previous philosophers. It is true, he admits, that the notion of an exact instant of time causes problems;<sup>16</sup> but, he counters, psychology need not deal with such an instant, since mental experience proceeds by way of an enduring, specious present. It is not point-like; rather, it lasts, albeit for a debatable span. As he writes:

the practically cognized present is no knife-edge, but a saddle-back, with a certain breadth of its own on which we sit perched, and from which we look in two directions into time. The unit of composition of our perception of time is a duration, with a bow and a stern, as it were – a rearward and a forward-looking end. It is only as parts of this duration-block that the relation of succession of one end to the other is perceived. We do not first feel one end and then feel the other after it, and from the perception of the succession infer an interval of time between, but we seem to feel the interval of time as a whole, with its two ends embedded in it.<sup>17</sup>

Building on the work of Wilhelm Wundt, James gave this present a length of 1/500 of a second to 12 seconds.<sup>18</sup> In order to argue that this specious present offers a firm foundation for the analysis of mental experience, James next had to explain how this specious present works.

William Stern had already suggested that the present possessed an extension real enough for the purposes of scientific psychology. James, however, argued that what we call the 'present' is in fact the retained residue of the recent past. Here he relies upon "E.R. Clay," an author who did not exist, but who (as Holly Andersen has shown) should be associated with the anonymous author of an obscure tome called *The Alternative*, who in turn can be identified with a retired cigar manufacturer named E. Robert Kelly, the father of one of James' friends.<sup>19</sup> Kelly wrote that "the present [...] is really a part of the past – a recent past – delusively given as being a time that intervenes between past and future."<sup>20</sup> In addition to this odd citation, James builds upon the "empiric present" of Scottish 'Common-Sense' empiricism, from Thomas Reid to William Hamilton and Shadworth Hodgson.<sup>21</sup> Regardless of whether he got it from Kelly or Hodgson, James can be classed as having a 'retention theory' of the present. As he wrote: "what is past, to be known as past, must be

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<sup>16</sup> James, *Principles*, 1.608: "Let any one try, I will not say to arrest, but to notice or attend to, the present moment of time. One of the most baffling experiences occurs. Where is it, this present? It has melted in our grasp, fled ere we could touch it, gone in the instant of becoming. [...] It is, in fact, an altogether ideal abstraction."

<sup>17</sup> James, *Principles*, 1.609-10; Arstila and Lloyd, eds., *Subjective Time*, 12-13.

<sup>18</sup> James, *Principles*, 1.611-614. See esp. 611: "To realize an hour, we must count now! – now! – now! – now! – indefinitely. Each 'now' is the feeling of a separate bit of time, and the exact sum of the bits never makes a very clear impression on our mind." But what is a 'bit of time' supposed to be here?

<sup>19</sup> Andersen, "Development," in Arstila and Lloyd, 29.

<sup>20</sup> E.R. Clay, also known as E. Robert Kelly, *The Alternative: a Study in Psychology* (London: Macmillan, 1882), 167. This is cited in: James, *Principles*, 1.609; Arstila and Lloyd, eds., *Subjective Time*, 12.

<sup>21</sup> Andersen, "Development," 30-37. She cites Hodgson, *Philosophy of Reflection* (London: Longman, Roberts, and Green, 1878), 253: "Crudely and popularly we divide the course of time into Past, Present, and Future; but, strictly speaking, there is no Present; it is composed of Past and Future divided by an indivisible point or instant. That instant, or time-point, is the strict present. What we loosely call the Present is an empirical portion of the course of time, containing at least the minimum of consciousness, in which the instant of change is the present time-point."

known *with* what is present, and *during* the ‘present’ spot of time.”<sup>22</sup> By appealing to retention as the key to the specious present, James was arguing that memory, far from being relegated exclusively to the past, had a role to play in creating the present.<sup>23</sup> In making this move, he was, whether he wanted to or not, putting himself back into conversation with the ancient philosophers of time, from Aristotle to Augustine.<sup>24</sup>

## From Augustine to Brentano

Turning to the eleventh book of Augustine’s *Confessions*, we find it to be theologically motivated. He is seeking to defend his reading of Genesis against a rival group known as the Manichaeans; in so doing, he stumbles upon some observations about temporality that continue to strike even modern readers as thought-provoking. For the sake of concision, let us consider only two such observations: one about the non-being of the present; the other about the necessary role played by memory in constituting so-called ‘present’ temporal experience.

The problem with the present, for Augustine as for Aristotle, is that it probably does not exist in any strict sense. Time, for him, certainly does exist, but the integrity of the phases of time is doubtful. ‘Past, present, and future’ make sense as linguistic tenses, but perhaps not as discrete ‘chunks’ of the timeline, which looks much more like an Aristotelian continuum. If we try to isolate a ‘now’ there, we fail; as Augustine says:

If we conceive of something temporal which could no longer be divided into little parts of movements—that alone is what could be called ‘present.’ And yet it flies immediately from future to past, so that it is stretched out by not even the smallest pause. For if it is stretched out, it is divided between past and future. But the present has no span.<sup>25</sup>

In the absence of a present moment, it seems we are stuck in a true flux, not a series of moments. This is an Augustinian-Heraclitean river of time, sweeping us ever onward without respite.

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<sup>22</sup> James, *Principles*, 1.629; his italics. See also *ibid.*, 605: “To think a thing as past is to think it amongst the objects or in the direction of the objects which at the present moment appear affected by this quality.” See again *ibid.*, 606: “The knowledge of some other part of the stream, past or future, near or remote, is always mixed in with our knowledge of the present thing.” In that same chapter (15), James also cites Mill’s *Analysis of the Phenomena of the Human Mind* (London: Longman, Green, and Dyer, 1869), 319, to make the point that a truly momentary consciousness would not be capable of contiguous thought. All the same, he retains a quasi-momentary consciousness in order to organize brain-states, which quasi-momentariness is rooted in the contested notion of a specious present. It can also be noted here that engagement with Buddhist philosophy on momentariness, non-self, and contiguous activity would have been fruitful for James. Such engagement might deepen if one looks to James’ later works, such as “A Pluralistic Mystic” (1910) and his doctrine of non-self ‘sciousness.’ At that point, however, one might ask: what is to safeguard the late James from ‘falling back’ into dialectical idealism or ‘falling forward’ into phenomenological quasi-idealism?

<sup>23</sup> On the difference between retention or primary memory and the more complex workings of memory in general, see James, *Principles*, 1.643-657; Arstila and Lloyd, eds., *Subjective Time*, 19-21.

<sup>24</sup> See Andersen, “Development,” 27, for an insightful remark: “Where precisely a given philosopher draws the line between perception and memory is a function of the theory of consciousness being advocated; allowing for a nonzero duration to the present moment in experience places restrictions on the kinds of theories of consciousness one can endorse.”

<sup>25</sup> Augustine, *Confessiones*, CCSL 27, ed. Luc Verheijen (Turnhout: Brepols, 1981), 11.15.20. My translation.

What then would Augustine say about the stream of consciousness? Like James, he wants to emphasize its flux-like character, although he is much more worried about the non-being of the present. Nevertheless, he too invokes the possibility of a specious present, not as a real component of time, but as the human psyche's reaction to living in a time without present:

Neither future nor past things are, and it is not correct to say: 'there are three times – past, present, and future.' Rather, it would perhaps be more correct to say: 'there are three times – the present time concerning what has passed away; the present time concerning what is 'there;' and the present time concerning what will be.' These three somethings are in the living soul. I do not see them anywhere else. The present time having to do with past things is memory. The present time having to do with present things is 'watching-over.' The present time having to do with future things is expectation.<sup>26</sup>

This specious, threefold present of Augustine's seems to give equal weight to both past and future – *memoria* and *expectatio* – but, in general, the weight shifts in favour of the past. It is easy to see why, glancing at the retrospective autobiography that fills the rest of his *Confessions*. For him, our experience of time is like a climber sliding backwards down the side of a mountain, desperately grasping at firm grips always just out of reach. In his own words: time-consciousness is *distentio animi*, the sensation undergone by the psyche as it is stretched apart by time, without any present instant, reaching back into the past while being pummelled by the future.

And so Augustine's skepticism about the integrity of the instant outpaces that of James. Hand in hand with such skepticism went Augustine's emphasis on *memoria* as the faculty that—alongside but more intensely than *expectatio* – made time-consciousness coherent. In the absence of a present moment, the psyche can only maintain its minimal sense of continuity by 'being stretched out.' Are we then left with merely a case of non-overlapping *magisteria*: on the one hand, James' pragmatic acceptance of the present and, on the other, Augustine's anxiety over the absence of the present? Or can we instead link these two together in a way that sheds light upon the problems they both encountered via their psychologies of temporal experience?

As it happens, another nineteenth-century psychologist also aimed to think through these interrelated problems of retention and the present. For Brentano, a Catholic priest in the era of the Neo-Scholastic revival of Aristotelianism, the connection of the notion of a 'present phase of consciousness' to the Aristotelian problem of point and continuum was obvious.<sup>27</sup> However, whereas Aristotle implies that the measuring mind 'projects' now-points onto the *sunecheia* or continuum,<sup>28</sup> Brentano associates such now-points with the

<sup>26</sup> Augustine, *Confessiones*, 11.20.26: The complicated term *contuitus* is translated as 'watching-over' because that connects most clearly to the root verb *contueri* and avoids improper connotations of attention or perception.

<sup>27</sup> For general information on Brentano, see Peter Simons, "Franz Brentano," in Sebastian Luft and Søren Overgaard, *Routledge Companion to Phenomenology* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 17-28.

<sup>28</sup> This is, at the very least, the interpretation offered by Alexander of Aphrodisias; see Sorabji, *Commentators*, 209. Brentano is sensitive to the problem of the point, too, even if his psychology pushes him to modify Aristotle. On point and continuum, see Brentano, *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint*, tr. Antos C. Ranurello, D.B. Terrell, and Linda L. McAlister (New York: Routledge, 1995), Appendix ("XVI: On *Ens Rationis* (1917)"), 354: "We must ask those who say that the continuum ultimately consists of points what they mean by a point. Many reply that a

present phase of consciousness, to which he accords a privileged degree of 'being.'<sup>29</sup> All the same, he must agree with Aristotle that the now-point has no extension (otherwise it would not be a point); therefore, Brentano's present phases of consciousness themselves lack extension.<sup>30</sup> They sound more like knife-edges than saddlebacks, James might say. There is a mathematical elegance to Brentano's formulation, but that elegance comes at a descriptive cost, since it becomes difficult to see how point-like units of consciousness could make sense of the temporal world of objects (or, as he might prefer, intentional contents), which Brentano admits to be an enduring continuum.<sup>31</sup> In order to solve this problem, Brentano

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point is a cut (*tomē*) which divides the continuum into two parts. The answer to this is that such a cut cannot be called a thing and therefore cannot be an object of presentation in the strict and proper sense at all. We have, rather, only presentations of contiguous parts. Someone else might say that he understands a point to be a thing which belongs to the continuum with which it or one of its parts ends. It is the initial, itself unextended, element of the extended thing. And if one should resist affirming such a thing, the doubt can be overcome merely by taking note of its analogy in time, where 'now' is an unextended moment and time exists only in terms of this moment." As the footnote in Brentano's text points out, he is here taking as his target the hyper-atomists who denied the natural reality of any continuum, such as Boltzmann, the pioneer of statistical kinematics in physics. Brentano's psychological treatment of the 'point-continuum' problem is thus taking place simultaneously and in some connection with the debates about atomism in physics at the end of the nineteenth century.

<sup>29</sup> Brentano, *Psychology*, Appendix ("XIV: On Objects of Thought (1915)"), 326: "What we are concerned with are temporal relations, and the question arises first of all how we come to understand them. It seems certain that we can never think of anything without thinking of something as present, that is to say, however, as on a boundary line which exists as the connecting point of an otherwise non-existent continuum or as providing its beginning or its end. So along with the idea of the present, we also get those of the past and future *in modo obliquo* as that the boundary of which is formed by the present." For Brentano, *in obliquo* presentations are the 'extra' or relational presentations that come along with our substantive or *in recto* presentations. A temporal example would be: when I think of the earlier *in recto*, I think of the later *in obliquo*. Of course, the past and the future do not 'exist' in a presentist sense, which means that Brentano must find a place for *in obliquo* presentations of nonexistent things, which strikes him as a bit curious. Cf. Appendix XVI, "On *Ens Rationis*," 364: "If something is affirmed temporally, if it is affirmed as part or as future, it is affirmed only in the *modo obliquo*, which is to say it is not actually affirmed at all. Something now existing is affirmed as more or less separated from it in one of two opposing directions. Past things and future things do not actually exist at all, and (no matter how strange it may sound to some) if there were no longer anything present, there would also no longer be anything past. In antiquity it was said, 'For this one thing even God cannot do—make what has happened not happen.' But they did not notice that this can only be true if God cannot make it the case that nothing is present, either. This is certainly true, of course, but only because being present pertains to Him as it does to everything else which truly exists. This has often been denied in antiquity and still is right down to the present time."

<sup>30</sup> To be more precise, Brentano follows Aristotle even further in his hairsplitting approach to the meaning of the term 'present;' see *Psychology*, Appendix XIV, 327: "A thing can be present in three different ways: (1) by bringing something in the past to an end; (2) by beginning something in the future; and (3) by doing both and so serving as the connecting link between past and future, in which case we say that something continues to be. In the continua of which the present is the boundary, there are further boundaries to be distinguished, *ad infinitum*. Some are to be seen as those which have formed the connecting link between earlier and later, others as those which will form it. We can even say of the present boundary that, as it now is, it was once in the future and as future it was located successively at a continuous series of intervals away from being present. And we can just as well say of it that, quite as it is now, it will have been and will be successively located at a continuous series of intervals away from being the present." Note the mathematical tone and the emphasis on the present as a limit; both remain Aristotelian hallmarks.

<sup>31</sup> On intentionality, see Brentano, *Psychology*, 88: "Every mental phenomenon is characterized by what the scholastics of the Middle Ages called the intentional (or mental) inexistence of an object and what we might call, though not wholly unambiguously, the reference to a content, a direction towards an object (which is not to be understood here as meaning a thing), or an immanent objectivity." Cf. Simons, "Brentano," 21. In *Psychology*, Appendix XIV, 328-329, Brentano (like Augustine) uses the example of a song to reaffirm the strangeness of *in obliquo* presentations in temporal relations: i.e., the strangeness of the fact that there is an intrinsic relationship between the one note that 'really exists' (on a presentist basis) and the notes that do not 'really exist,' since they are



appeals to *proteraesthesia* or the ‘feeling of the earlier’: that is, the retention of just-past intentional contents alongside present contents.<sup>32</sup> This salvages the ability of the psyche to perceive a world which plays out as a continuum, but it does so, again, at a cost. Here the devil’s bargain Brentano makes is to allow the past – even if just the slightest sliver of the past – into the present. Given the extension-less character of the present he needs, however, this allowance is obviously impossible.<sup>33</sup> You cannot fit a saddleback into a knife-edge.

Within a few decades, Brentano’s empirical psychology gave rise to the phenomenology of the mathematician-turned-philosopher Edmund Husserl.<sup>34</sup> Sparing the gory details, it is safe to say that subsequent adherents of Husserlian phenomenology were obsessed with the problem of time.<sup>35</sup> The tradition frayed into diverse strands, each thinker offering their own critique of the phenomenology of time as it developed out of Brentano.<sup>36</sup>

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‘in’ the past or future. On the linearity of the continuum, see *ibid.*, 329: “People have often asked whether we can be certain that the temporal continuum goes in a straight line. The answer to the question is affirmative, as certainly as ‘before’ and ‘after’ are precisely converse relationships, and ending and beginning are contradictory alternatives.”

<sup>32</sup> See Nicolas de Warren, *Husserl and the Promise of Time: Subjectivity in Transcendental Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2009), 57-58.

<sup>33</sup> In Brentano’s later work, like the 1917 “*On Ens Rationis*” piece, he further complicates this relational constitution of the present; see *Psychology*, Appendix XVI, 355: “Now it is true that everything which is in time is present, existing now. But nevertheless it is not something existing in isolation in and of itself. It is rather continuing, or ending or beginning. It cannot exist without a relation of continuity (*Kontinualrelation*) to what is earlier or later and it is thereby connected with things which are separated from it, some by a greater and some by a lesser interval. The interval may be conceived to be as small as you please but not infinitely small. Having a finite far-ranging connection of this sort with other things is part of the concept of the present. Without this relational character it could not be conceived nor could it ever be an element of something with temporal duration and development.” Brentano next restates a version of the point-continuum problem in Aristotelian terms: “The present belongs to a continuum which does not exist except in terms of the element in terms of which it is present. Someone might find it to be simply inadmissible to say that the continuum exists, since only one element of it exists. But this element does not have being in and of itself, but only insofar as it belongs to the continuum. In order to express this peculiar feature of the case, we also make use of the following form of discourse: the continuum does not exist perfectly, but imperfectly, not in terms of its totality, but in terms of a boundary. If you understand ‘part’ to mean an extended part which has parts itself, this means not only less than total, but less than partial as well. In view of this, Aristotle describes motion as an imperfect actuality (*energeia atelēs*).” The section devolves into painfully exquisite detail from this passage onward. On the question of the worth of ‘relative timing,’ consider Brentano’s essay on Comte, quoted by Oscar Kraus in his 1924 introduction to Brentano’s *Psychology*, 403-404: “What distinguishes our position from that of the sceptics is our claim that it is possible to know the true relations that exist between things. For example, [...] we can never know the absolute moment at which an event occurs, but we may be able to specify exactly when it occurs in relation to some other event. It is for this reason that there is a vast gulf fixed between ourselves and the sceptics. [...] Thus we are not acquainted with the absolutely specific spatial and temporal properties of things; but Brentano, contrary to the modern ‘theory of relativity,’ claims it to be evident *a priori* that things will have these properties if they exist.”

<sup>34</sup> See James Mensch, “A Brief Account of Husserl’s Conception of Our Consciousness of Time,” in *Subjective Time*, 43-60.

<sup>35</sup> See Nicolas de Warren, “Time,” in the *Routledge Companion*, 190-201, esp. 190-191: “Aside from an interest in Augustine, Husserl was an attentive reader of William James, Alexius Meinong, and William Stern, and was especially influenced, as with so much else, by Franz Brentano.”

<sup>36</sup> Whether Brentano’s account of time remains merely ‘psychological’ to the end is an open question. Recall “*On Ens Rationis*,” in *Psychology*, Appendix XVI, 358 and following, wherein Brentano lists the possible attitudes about the ‘reality’ of time among the philosophers. His own stance seems to have migrated from an early, ‘psychologizing’ phase to a later, ‘realist’ (or ‘reist’) phase, perhaps in response to accusations of psychologism levelled by Husserl. Brentano’s mini-history includes statements that: Kant is merely a subjective idealist, with his claim that time is necessary but only as a form of intuition; Schopenhauer’s doctrine of time is merely a grotesque appropriation of Kant; Descartes and Locke reduce time to “duration” (here apparently meaning the idea of time as a

One of the more lasting critiques – and the most ‘Augustinian’ one – argues that the entirety of the phenomenological tradition falls apart on itself due to the contradictions inherent in the idea of a ‘present phase of consciousness,’ which would be the foundation of reality (if our concerns are ontological) or a ‘diagnostically relevant’ mental state (if our concerns are psychological or therapeutic).<sup>37</sup> But if, as Brentano’s thought already implied, a sliver of the past had to contaminate the present in order for human temporal experience to make sense, then our focus on the present begins to blur; the past and (more strangely) the future must be permitted into the present phase of consciousness, which means that privileging said phase is neither philosophically nor psychologically defensible.

## Conclusion

So much for Brentano; but what about James? Was his thought also susceptible to this critique of the present? If so, are there consequences? Admittedly, James’ pragmatic approach aims to avoid philosophical niceties in favour of observable psychological phenomena. At the end of the day, he does not care if the present is ‘real’ or not. He is willing to adopt the saddleback hypothesis because it gets results, not because it can withstand the attacks of Aristotle or Augustine. It remains possible, however, that the unreality of the present moment undermines any presumption of a ‘present phase of consciousness,’ a ‘current mental state,’ and the like. If one of the defining characteristics of the present is that it be past – as James casually admits and as Brentano struggles to scholastically ‘define away’ – then the question of how psychologists diagnose mental states within the flow of time might be thrown open to speculation once more in the years to come.

What then of the future? The contamination of the present by the past was apparent to Augustine, James, and Brentano, but the role played by the future in constituting temporal experience tended to be murkier. In the phenomenological tradition that developed out of Brentano, the term “protention” tended to be used to balance out “retention” or *proteraesthesia*. Of course, the idea of ‘holding onto the future before it happens’ sounds a bit odder than does ‘holding onto the past after it has slipped away.’ Augustine rendered this oddness digestible by way of his theology, which favoured the divine grace of predestinating providence over the dream of a radically open-ended free will. The fact that the future was just as real as the present or the past fits squarely into the Augustinian system. But what,

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‘thing’ the duration of which would cover the duration of all other temporally extended things—which of course falls short of time as a unified form that conditions everything temporal in the first place); physicists like Boltzmann fail to explain time because they reject natural continua as incoherent or paradoxical. While all of the former reject the reality of time, these next few authors affirm it with varying degrees of plausibility: Aristotle (of course); maybe some church fathers (360: “The Church fathers often said that time was created along with the creation of the world, and perhaps not all of them meant by that that it was created along with it as a particular thing.”); Bonaventure, who said that a thing’s time was its existence; Newton (who perhaps went too far by ascribing time and space to God); and Leibniz (who rejected Newton on this as in other matters). Bolzano, for his part, was a Neo-Leibnizian; Thomas Reid, meanwhile, offered us an absolute notion of time, which was then modified by Anton Marty (himself inspired by Brentano). Speaking for himself, Brentano suggests the following: “The spatial is the physical [*das Körperliche*] and the temporal is the real [*das Reale*] as such. Neither the one nor the other can exist or be conceived, not even in a general way, without a relation involving continuity whereby both the extent and direction of the relation of continuity can remain entirely unspecified. [...] There is truly no space and time but only the spatial and the temporal, and the temporal is only the present, regardless of how it may be set apart from the earlier as the later, and from the later as the earlier, at every conceivable distance. There is no infinite continuum here—only a point belonging to the nonexistent continuum.” So much for Brentano’s synechology.

<sup>37</sup> See, *inter alia*, Jacques Derrida, *Voice and Phenomenon*, tr. Leonard Lawlor (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 2010).

once again, about James? Does his admission of an enduring, saddleback-like present open his version of temporality up to the possibility of influence ‘from’ the future?<sup>38</sup> As it turns out, James was not at all ignorant of the connection between psychology and determinism, albeit in a new, less obviously theistic guise. Brentano, meanwhile, had left the Catholic Church over Vatican I and papal infallibility, though he retained his own brand of theism, which he was happy to invoke when treating temporality.<sup>39</sup> James’ own stance on these matters can be glimpsed in his essays on “Reflex Action and Theism” and the “Dilemma of Determinism” in *The Will to Believe*.<sup>40</sup> To exhaustively examine this relationship between Augustine’s grace and James’ future would, however, take us too far afield for the purposes of this paper. For now, let us end with an anecdote taken from the world not of psychology, but of physics, which is not inappropriate, since Brentano corresponded with contemporary physicists like Boltzmann concerning this very problem of the point and the continuum. In the 1930s, the English physicist Paul Dirac met a Belgian Catholic priest named Georges Lemaître, who also happened to be the father of the theory of the primeval atom (or, as it was later known, the ‘big bang’). Learning of this new physics, which elegantly solved a number of mathematical problems while gesturing also in the direction of theology, Dirac experienced a kind of ecstasy. As he put it:

When I was talking with Lemaître about this subject and feeling stimulated by the grandeur of the picture that he has given us, I told him I thought cosmology was the

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<sup>38</sup> James, *Principles*, 1.606-607: “A simple sensation [...] is an abstraction, and all our concrete states of mind are representations of objects with some amount of complexity. Part of the complexity is the echo of the objects just past, and, in a less degree, perhaps, the foretaste of those just to arrive. [...] These lingerings of old objects, these incomings of the new, are the germs of memory and expectation, the retrospective and the prospective sense of time. They give that continuity to consciousness without which it could not be called a stream.” See also Arstila and Lloyd, eds., *Subjective Time*, 12. Here James uses the recitation of the alphabet as his example, but we might link it back to Augustine’s well-known ‘song’ example in *Confessions* 11. James does later cite (608-609) a ‘song’ example taken from E.R. Clay, *The Alternative*, 167, who inspired his notion of the specious present.

<sup>39</sup> Brentano, *Psychology*, Appendix XIV, 327-328, gets rather theological when trying to explain the unity of temporality as it affects all (conscious?) things: “A further question has been raised as to whether we can be immediately certain that there is one single time and that it somehow has an influence on or underlies every temporal thing in the way that spatial extension underlies the sense-qualities. Taking the above discussion into account, we see that this is not the case. This is not to say that it cannot be proved that everything which falls within our experience endures only because it is steadily renewed by the creative influence of the first immediately necessary principle; that this first principle manifests a perfectly uniform infinitesimal change which contradicts neither its necessity nor its uniform perfection, but is rather required by it; and further, that as a consequence of the change in the first supporting principle, all creatures, too, manifest a certain uniform variation in their continued existence by virtue of which everything which exists at the same time bears a certain common characteristic, which is, however, transcendent. In order for us to comprehend it, God himself would have had to become an object of our intuitive awareness.” In other words: subjective modes of temporal experience seem to undermine our sense of an objective or cosmic time, and yet that does not rule out the possibility of some engine of infinitesimal change that governs all things on theological (and maybe physical) grounds.

<sup>40</sup> James, *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (New York: Cosimo, 2006), 111-144, 145-183. Consider this passage at the end of his determinism essay (183): “Now it is entirely immaterial, in this scheme, whether the creator leave the absolute chance-possibilities to be decided by himself, each when its proper moment arrives, or whether, on the contrary, he alienate this power from himself, and leave the decision out and out to finite creatures such as we men are. The great point is that the possibilities are really *here*. Whether it be we who solve them, or he working through us, at those soul-trying moments when fate’s scales seem to quiver, and good snatches the victory from evil or shrinks nerveless from the fight, is of small account, so long as we admit that the issue is decided nowhere else than *here* and *now*.” Italics his.

branch of science that lies closest to religion. However, Lemaître did not agree with me. After thinking it over, he suggested that the science lying closest to religion was: psychology.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Dirac, "The Scientific Work of Georges Lemaître," in John Farrell, *The Day Without Yesterday: Lemaître, Einstein, and the Birth of Modern Cosmology* (New York: Basic, 2002), 191. Dirac's word order has been slightly edited for emphasis.

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