

A REPLY TO SCHLESINGER

BY L. NATHAN OAKLANDER

In his reply to my paper ([2]) Professor Schlesinger claims to show that “there is no doubt that the transient theory of time is consistent and intelligible” ([3], p. 95). He supports his claim by appealing to the observations of the inhabitants of two physical systems X and Y in which the X-clocks are running only half as fast as the Y-clocks. In my reply I shall argue that the situation he describes is irrelevant to task he wants to accomplish, and that, therefore, doubt does indeed arise concerning the coherence of the theory he propounds.

To get to the heart of the matter consider the following passage:

The moving NOW is obviously not a material object; it is indeed not a particular of any sort. Being present is a property which every event assumes and then sheds. A property or a universal can of course be exemplified by different events in different places and at different times. Thus, none of the difficulties mentioned by Oaklander on p. 395 concerning the question where exactly the NOW is, will actually arise (p. 95).

But they do arise. Schlesinger claims that being in the present or NOWNESS is a universal. A universal is a timeless entity that is one and the same or wholly contained in each particular that exemplifies it. Therefore, on Schlesinger’s view, literally the same NOW is at every time, and that impales him on the horns of a dilemma: his position is either incoherent or circular. To see what is involved, note first that moments must exemplify NOWNESS timelessly or temporally. However, if NOWNESS is timelessly at all times, then there is only one time, or rather, since time requires succession, there is no time. The “temporal” series is a *totum simul* in which all moments exist NOW. The alternative, according to which moments are NOW at different times, renders his position circular. For, if there is a second “time” series, then the problem for which it is introduced, namely, to account for succession in the first series, re-arises in it. The problem is that since the NOW is a universal it is literally and wholly at each moment in the second series, thus making all moments NOW. It is of no use to say, as Schlesinger does, that the NOW in X is at t_1 when the NOW in Y is at t_2 , and that the NOW in X is at t_2 when the NOW in Y is at t_4 , and so on, since the NOW in Y is the *same* as the NOW in X and hence all “times” in X exemplify the same NOW as all “times” in Y. Thus, the existence of temporal succession in both X and Y is still unaccounted for. Nor does it help to say that t_1 in X is NOW at t_1 , and t_2 in Y is NOW at t_2 , and so on, for those statements have an unchanging truth-value and so do not reflect the transient aspect of time.

The difficulties with Schlesinger’s reformulated theory of time can also be seen by considering what he says about change:

In order to account for a change from red to green nothing nearly as complicated is required as Oaklander indicates on p. 396. For that we do not even need to make use of the transient aspect of time. By merely saying that *i* is red at t_1 and green at t_2 we have already made clear that *i* changes from red at t_1 to green at t_2 (*ibid.*)

Can the problem of change really be handled that simply? I do not think so. Schlesinger's account of change is adequate if and only if t_1 and t_2 name successive times. What, then, accounts for t_1 and t_2 being members of a temporal series? Schlesinger claims that i 's changing does not require the transient aspect of time. However, since i can change only if there exists a temporal series, and since i can change without the passage of time it follows that, on Schlesinger's view, there can be a temporal series without temporal passage. But it is followers of Russell who claim that there can be a temporal series without passage. In what sense, then, is Schlesinger's view a defence of the intelligibility of the transient theory of time? On the other hand, if he treats moments as themselves subject to becoming then (i) contrary to what he claims, a thing's changing does require the moving NOW, and (ii) the incoherence or circularity involved in claiming that NOWNESS is a universal that all moments exemplify re-emerges.

Schlesinger believes that the question of the truth of the transient theory of time, like all metaphysical disputes, is not one "to which a final and conclusive answer is possible" (*ibid.*). I would certainly agree that the question of the flow of time will always have proponents arguing for and against its reality. However, it does not follow that neither position is true and neither false. I have argued that Schlesinger's explication of the statement 'The NOW moves' is neither consistent nor intelligible and so a theory of time based on it cannot possibly be true. (The inconsistency involved in treating NOWNESS as a property that events acquire and shed is also argued for by Mellor in [1].)

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[1] D. H. Mellor, *Real Time* (Cambridge, 1981).

[2] L. N. Oaklander, "McTaggart, Schlesinger, and the Two-Dimensional Time Hypothesis", *The Philosophical Quarterly* 33 (1983), pp.391-7.

[3] G. Schlesinger, "How to navigate the river of time", *The Philosophical Quarterly*, this issue.