

Oaklander, L. "On Our Experience of Ceasing to Exist." *The Ontology of Time*. Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2004.

On Our Experience of Ceasing to Exist

In a recent article, J. D. Kiernan-Lewis has claimed that "it is evident that Nathan Oaklander has failed to understand both the analogy and the ontological point of the argument against tenselessness."¹ The argument, which he believes is implicit in Prior's classic paper "Thank Goodness That's Over," is analogous to the arguments by Thomas Nagel and Frank Jackson against physicalism.² Thus, Kiernan-Lewis argues that the detenser's attempt to provide an ontological reduction of the experience of a headache ceasing to exist fails because it does not explain the subjective, first-person experience of what it is like for a headache to cease to exist. In this paper, I shall show that his argument against the tenseless theory of time is not, as he says, "ludicrously simple and quite decisive" but rather question-begging and unsound.

In order to perspicuously uncover the errors I believe exist in Kiernan-Lewis's argument against the detenser, I shall quote his statement of it at length:

Suppose we tried to say that the experience of my headache ceasing to exist is "nothing but" my headache (or temporal parts thereof) tenselessly existing at times before other times at which it does not tenselessly exist. Well, if we tried such a reduction, the essential features of the ceasing-to-exist of my headache would be left out. No description of the third-person, tenseless facts about me and my headache would convey the subjective, first-person character of the ceasing of my headache, simply because the subjective features are different from the tenseless features. Someone-say, a timeless God-who knew all but only the tenseless facts, and so knew that my headache "ceases" in the sense of their being times after which it tenselessly occurs, would still not know what it is like *for* a headache to cease. Since no analysis of my experience of the ceasing-to-exist of a headache in

tenseless terms is possible, no tenseless reduction of my experience can succeed. Therefore, a tenseless description of reality is necessarily incomplete: reality contains irreducibly tensed features.³

This argument raises several questions. First, what are the essential features of the subjective, first-person experience of my headache ceasing to exist? Second, is the detenser offering an ontological reduction, arguing that the experience of an event ceasing to exist is "nothing but" some tenseless description in the way in which the physicalist argues that pain is nothing but neuron firings? And third, if, as I will argue, the detenser is not attempting an ontological reduction, then what is the explanation of Kieman-Lewis's assertion that the detenser is offering a reduction? In what follows, I shall take up each of these questions.

Let us begin by considering the essential features of the experience of a headache ceasing to exist. Clearly, on any analysis, to experience the ceasing to exist of a headache, I would first have to be conscious of having a headache and then be conscious of not having a headache. For Kieman-Lewis, however, something more is involved, namely, the experience of tense. Unfortunately, Kieman-Lewis never explains exactly how tense figures into the experience, or what the "tensed phenomenological features" of ceasing to exist are. He simply assumes, without further ado, that the tensed interpretation of the phenomena is correct.

Given the assumption that the essential features of the experience of ceasing to exist are tensed, Kieman-Lewis's argument against the detenser can be stated forcefully:

1. The first-person, subjective experience of a headache ceasing to exist involves the experience of tensed phenomenological features.
2. The tenseless theory of time denies the metaphysical reality of tense.
3. Hence, the tenseless theory attempts an ontological reduction of the tensed experience, maintaining that the experience of my headache ceasing to exist is "nothing but" my headache existing at times earlier than other times at which it does not exist.
4. This reduction is unsuccessful since it fails to capture the first-person perspective: the experience of my headache changing its tense.
5. Therefore, a tenseless description of reality is necessarily incomplete: reality contains irreducibly tensed features. In short, reality contains irreducibly tensed features because our *experience is tensed*.

One weakness of this argument is that the first premise assumes what needs to be proved, namely, that the proper interpretation of the subjective experience of ceasing to exist is tensed. The detenser can give an account of the experience of my headache ceasing to exist without appealing to the reality of tense. It involves first having a headache and at the same time being conscious that one is having a headache. It involves second the consciousness of no longer having a headache. This involves both the awareness of my having various thoughts and feelings and not having a headache. It also involves the memory of a headache that does not exist now, at this moment, but did exist (or exists tenselessly) at an earlier moment. In other words, if I am aware at time₁ that I have a headache, and I am aware at a later time₂ that I do not have a headache, and I remember my headache existing at time₁, then I am having an experience of my headache ceasing to exist.

What this account of our experience of time makes clear is that the ceasing to exist of a headache (or any other event, for that matter) is a process that takes place at two moments: the last moment of its existence and the first moment of its nonexistence. Thus, on the detenser's reading, a headache's ceasing to exist over the interval t_n-t_{n+1} is its being located up to t , and thus making the present tense belief "My headache exists (now)" true up to t , and false at t_{n+1} (and later). Similarly, a headaches beginning to exist at t is nothing more than its being located at t and thus making the present tense belief "My headache exists (now)" true at t and false *earlier*. Kiernan-Lewis might object that since the knowledge of my headache ceasing to exist requires that the tensed beliefs "My headache exists (now)" and "My headache did exist" are both true (at different times), there must be tensed facts to account for their truth. The inference, however, is fallacious. For if a belief or judgment is indexical, as it is if it is tensed, then its truth conditions are token-reflexive. So all it takes to make a token of the tensed belief "My headache exists (now)" true is that the headache occurs simultaneously with the belief. And all it takes to make a token of the tensed belief "My headache did exist" true is that the headache ended before I had the belief (or that the belief is held after the end of the headache).⁴

Thus, the detenser does not deny that we have the experience of ceasing to exist but believes that the essential features of the experience can be explained in terms of our consciousness of the occurrence of different events at different times. On the tenseless theory, the subjective experience of ceasing to exist is a B-experience that does not involve any tensed features.⁵ It should be clear, therefore, that unlike the physicalist, *the detenser is not giving an ontological reduction of the experience of ceasing to exist*. Since the experience in question is a B-experience, there is no need to offer a reductive analysis to avoid the reality of tense. The question we must now ask is why does Kiernan-Lewis make these mistakes?

Recall that Kiernan-Lewis's argument against the detenser rests on the thesis that the detenser must give a third-person description of the fact of the ceasing to exist of my headache and in so doing leaves out the first-person features. There are two confusions that lead to this mistaken thesis. First, Kiernan-Lewis confuses the detensers account of someone *experiencing*, for example, perceiving, an event ceasing to exist and the detensers account of an event, whether experienced or not, ceasing to exist. Thus, he claims that on the tenseless view, "the experience of my headache ceasing to exist is 'nothing but' my headache...tenselessly existing at times before other times at which it does not tenselessly exist."⁶ Given this confusion, it is not surprising that Kiernan-Lewis would find something missing in the detenser's account of the *experience* of my headache ceasing to exist. What is missing, however, is not the tensed phenomenological features he avows but precisely those (tenseless) features that he failed to include, namely, the consciousness at one time of my headache and then at a later time, the memory, but not the consciousness, of my headache.

A second confusion that contributes to Kiernan-Lewis's mistakes is between a timeless God having a timeless experience of my headache ceasing to exist with a *temporally* located person (me) having a temporal experience of my headache ceasing to exist. Thus, in his argument against the detenser, he says, "Someone--say, a timeless God-who knows all but only the tenseless facts, and so knew that my headache 'ceases' in the sense of there being times after which it tenselessly occurs, would still not know what it is like for a headache to cease to exist."⁷ Of course a timeless being could not know what it is like for a headache to cease to exist, but that is an irrelevant objection, since I am not a timeless, but a temporal, being and so can know from a first-person perspective what it is like for my headache to be over.

A final error that contributes to his argument against the detenser is that he believes "tenselessly existing items neither begin nor cease to exist at the times at which they tenselessly exist-they are, *ex hypothesi*, simply tenselessly there."⁸ If tenselessly existing items do not come to be nor cease to be, then my experience of my headache ceasing to be must be an illusion, and an ontological reduction of that experience would be necessary. However, on the tenseless theory, events *do* come to be and *do* cease to be, and Kiernan-Lewis can only think they do not by either misinterpreting the tenseless view or assuming a tensed interpretation of coming to be and ceasing to be.

The tenseless existence of an event at a certain time does not imply that it is *permanently* there or exists at every time. On the tenseless theory, there is a time at which an event does not (tenselessly) exist and a time at which it does. Admittedly, no event ceases to exist at the time at which it (tenselessly) exists, but that does not imply that an event does not begin at the (first) time at which it does exist (tenselessly) and end at a later time when it does not

exist. In claiming that on the tenseless theory all events exist at the times at which they tenselessly exist, that they are simply tenselessly there, the detenser is not saying anything that is incompatible with the experience of ceasing to exist as I have described it above. Events that exist earlier than the time at which I (tenselessly) experience their not existing is compatible with the experience and the reality of their ceasing to exist. Why, after all, should the fact that an event, say, a headache, which exists (tenselessly) at a time₂ later than the time₁ of my writing this sentence, entail that my headache does not come into existence at that later time₂? Why should the tensed sense of coming into existence (whatever sense that is) be assumed to be the sense in which events come into existence? Before we should accept the tensed account of coming to be and ceasing to be, Kiernan-Lewis must explain what the tensed account is and how, if at all, it is immune to the various dialectical arguments, stemming from McTaggart's paradox, against the tensed theory of time. Until he does, his critique of tenselessness rests upon unsupported ontological and phenomenological claims and a faulty analogy.

NOTES

¹ J. Delmas Kiernan-Lewis, "The Rediscovery of Tense: A Reply to Oaklander," *Philosophy* 69, no. 265 (1994): 231. 2.

² Kiernan-Lewis *assumes*, without hesitation, that the Nagel-Jackson arguments are sound. But see David K. Lewis, "What Experience Teaches," in *Mind and Cognition: A Reader*, ed. W. G. Lycan (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), pp. 499-519; Lawrence Nemirow, "Physicalism and the Cognitive Role of Acquaintance," in *Mind and Cognition*, pp. 490-99; and Hugh Mellor, "Nothing Like Experience." *Aristotelian Society Proceedings* 93 (1992-93): 1-16.

³ Kiernan-Lewis, "Rediscovery of Tense," p. 231.

⁴ See Murray MacBeath, "Mellor~ Emeritus Headache," *Ratio* 25 (1983): 81-88, repr. in *The New Theory of Time*, ed. L. Nathan Oaklander and Quentin Smith (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994), pp. 305-11.

⁵ See Clifford Williams, "The Phenomenology of B-Time," *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 30 (1992): 127-37, repr. in *The New Theory of Time*, pp. 360-72; Kiernan-Lewis, "Rediscovery of Tense," p. 232.

⁶ Kiernan-Lewis, "Rediscovery of Tense," p. 232.

⁷ *Ibid.* For an interesting discussion of what a timeless God can know from a detenser's point of view, see Murray MacBeath, "Omniscience and Eternity," *Aristotelian Society Proceedings Supplement* 63 (1989): 55-73.

⁸ Kiernan-Lewis, "Rediscovery of Tense," p. 232.