

Philosophic Exchange

Volume 31
Number 1 *Volume 31 (2000)*

Article 2

2001

Borges's Two Refutations of Time

James Van Cleve
Brown University

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.brockport.edu/phil_ex

 Part of the [Metaphysics Commons](#)

Repository Citation

Van Cleve, James (2001) "Borges's Two Refutations of Time," *Philosophic Exchange*: Vol. 31 : No. 1 , Article 2.
Available at: http://digitalcommons.brockport.edu/phil_ex/vol31/iss1/2

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @Brockport. It has been accepted for inclusion in Philosophic Exchange by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @Brockport. For more information, please contact kmyers@brockport.edu.



The College at
BROCKPORT
STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK



James Van Cleve

Borges's Two Refutations of Time

James Van Cleve

Philosophers seldom expect a magically minded man of letters . . . to use valid logic; much less in a revealing fashion.

Agassi¹

In his essay "A New Refutation of Time," Jorge Luis Borges offers two proofs of the unreality of time.² One of these, he tells us, is based on the idealism of Berkeley, and the other on Leibniz's Principle of the Identity of Indiscernibles. Borges does not always keep the two arguments separate, but they are independent arguments, and I shall reconstruct them as such here. The Berkeleyan argument may be used to refute one aspect of time that Borges deems essential to it and the Leibnizian argument to refute another.

It will be useful to begin by identifying three axioms of time order, never explicitly stated by Borges, but clearly the targets of his refutation. If time is real, Borges believes, all events must belong to one all-embracing temporal system of which the following principles hold:

1. Given any two events *e* and *f*, either *e* precedes *f*, or *f* precedes *e*, or *e* and *f* are simultaneous.³
2. If *e* precedes *f*, then *f* does not precede *e*. (As a corollary, no event precedes itself.)
3. If *e* precedes *f* and *f* precedes *g*, then *e* precedes *g*.

By virtue of Axiom 1, all events belong to a single connected temporal system. By virtue of Axioms 2 and 3, the temporal series is a partial ordering, ordered by a relation that is irreflexive and transitive. In the reconstructions I offer below, the Berkeleyan argument shows that Axiom 1 does not hold, while the Leibnizian argument shows that Axiom 2 does not hold (or at least that Axioms 2 and 3 do not both hold). If the reality of time requires the truth of these axioms, it follows that time is unreal.

I. The Berkeleyan Argument

The "Berkeleyan argument" is not Berkeley's own argument, as Borges admits, but he maintains nonetheless that it is an inevitable consequence of Berkeleyan doctrines. As Borges puts it, "I deny, with the arguments of idealism, the vast temporal series which idealism admits" (Irby, p. 222).

The argument consists of three premises, the first two supposedly drawn from Berkeley's philosophy and the third an empirical fact. The first premise is simply the master premise of Berkeley's idealism, the *esse-est-percipi* principle:

1. To be is to be perceived.

The next premise is really an extension of the first, though Borges apparently regards it as already implicit in the first:

2. To be F is to be perceived as being F; for two or more things to stand in relation R is for them to be perceived as standing in R.

In the first premise, we say that being in the sense of existence or *Sein* is dependent on perception; in the second, we say that being in the sense of predication or *Sosein* is dependent on perception. In other words, for something to have a certain property, it must be perceived as having that property; more generally, for two or more things to stand in a certain relation, they must be perceived as standing in that relation. I comment below on whether this extension is legitimate; for now I simply note that it is the second of the idealist premises that is essential in Borges's argument.

The final premise is this:

3. No one ever perceives the successiveness of events separated by more than a few seconds; nor does anyone ever perceives the simultaneity of events separated by great distances or occurring in two minds.

History books tell us that the Buddha's enlightenment preceded the death of Socrates by 128 years, but no one perceived the successiveness of these events. Again, Captain Isidoro Suarez is said to have decided the Victory of Junin at the beginning of August 1824, and supposedly on the same date Thomas DeQuincey issued a diatribe against Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre. But no one perceived the simultaneity of these events, Borges tells us, "inasmuch as the two men died—the one in the city of Montevideo, the other in Edinburgh—knowing nothing about each other" (Kerrigan, p. 50).

When we put premise 2 together with premise 3, we obtain Borges's conclusion:

4. The "vast temporal series" admitted by idealism falls apart into unrelated fragments. There is no stretch of events longer than a few seconds; nor is there any all-embracing system in which (for example) the victory of Suarez is simultaneous with the publication of DeQuincey's diatribe.

A similar argument would presumably show that there is no all-embracing spatial system in which any two objects are at some distance from each other. Indeed, Borges seems to think that the denial of space is already explicitly acknowledged by idealists, and that he is only drawing out what idealists should say as well about time.⁴

I now offer three observations to help elucidate the argument.

Observation 1. We must note that Borges is not giving the argument that many of his readers may surmise. Those whose acquaintance with Berkeley is only superficial (perhaps going no deeper than Borges's own summary) are likely to construe the argument thus: "For idealists, things in general exist only in being perceived. Therefore, time exists only in being perceived. And therefore, time is not real." But Berkeley would strenuously protest that second 'therefore'. That a thing exists only in being perceived does not, for Berkeley, prejudice its reality in the least; on the contrary, its being perceived is precisely what constitutes its reality.⁵ Borges is well aware of this. The problem with time (or with temporal relations) is not that they are only contents of perception; it is that for the most part they are not contents of perception at all. This is well brought out in the following quotation from Borges:

The denial of time involves two negations: the negation of the succession of the terms of a series, the negation of the synchronism of the terms in two different series. In fact, if each term is absolute, its relations are reduced to the consciousness that those relations exist. A state precedes another if it is known to be prior; a state of G is contemporary to a state of H if it is known to be contemporary. (Irby, p. 232)

I think it is clear that Borges's "if" should be read as an "if and only if."

To make the present point in another way, it is not Borges's view that time is an illusion, i.e., a false perception. With exceptions to be noted, it is not a perception at all. It is rather, as he says, a delusion—a false belief.

Observation 2. Borges admits that there are some instances in which it is true that one event precedes or is simultaneous with another, for he is a believer in the "specious present." I may be able literally to perceive the successiveness of events that are only a few seconds apart. But if events are more than a few seconds apart, no one perceives their successiveness, and if two events lie outside a single field of view, no one perceives their simultaneity. These facts are sufficient to generate his conclusion. As he says,

I deny, in a high number of instances, the existence of succession.
I deny, in a high number of instances, contemporaneity as well.
(Kerrigan, p. 50)

They tell me that the present, the "specious present," of the psychologists, lasts from between several seconds and the smallest fraction of a second: such is the length of the history of the universe.
(Kerrigan, p. 50)

Observation 3. The Berkeleyan argument is designed to make trouble for Axiom 1, which affirms the connectedness of time.⁶ It is worth noting, however, that it also makes trouble for Axiom 3, the transitivity axiom. Suppose that someone perceives that e precedes f; suppose also that someone (the same

someone or another) perceives that *f* precedes *g*; suppose finally that no one perceives that *e* precedes *g*. It will follow from Borges's second premise (which we are taking to imply that *e* precedes *f* iff someone perceives that *e* precedes *f*) that the transitivity axiom breaks down.

I now consider three objections to Borges's argument along with possible replies.

Objection 1. Borges has forgotten all about Berkeley's God. God, of course, can perceive the relations of events widely separated in space and time even if none of us can, and is therefore an exception to the "no one" in Borges's third premise. In one place Borges even acknowledges this, noting that Berkeley's God is a "ubiquitous spectator whose function is that of lending coherence to the world" (Irby, p. 229).

Reply. It is still of interest to see whether a Berkeley without God could avoid Borges's conclusion. Borges cites Hume as having gone beyond Berkeley by denying not just the existence of matter, but also the existence of spirits, and perhaps he thinks that a consistent Berkeley should have been Hume. In any case, he could simply have advertised his argument differently—not as an argument that any good Berkeleyan should deny the reality of time, but that any good Humean should do so.

Objection 2. It may be suggested that a more liberal idealism could reconstruct much more of the "vast temporal series" than Borges allows. For example, suppose we say that an event *e* precedes an event *z* iff there is an intervening series of events *f*, *g*, *h*, and so on, such that *e* is perceived by someone to precede *f*, *f* is perceived by someone (not necessarily the same someone) to precede *g*, and so on, until we reach *z*. That would enable us to say that *e* precedes *z* even if no one perceives that fact of precedence. It would also restore the lost transitivity axiom.⁷

Reply. True enough. But Borges's original argument is based on the empirical premise that no one perceives the successiveness of events separated by wide intervals. It is an equally plausible empirical premise that there simply aren't enough perceivers to pass the torch down through the centuries in the way now envisioned. There will still be events in the "vast temporal series" we are trying to recover that are not connected even by chains of perceived precedence in the required way.

Objection 3. This objection challenges the import of Borges's conclusion rather than the argument for it. Here are two statements by Borges of his thesis, in which he takes himself to be denying the reality of time:

There is no such thing as "the life of a man," nor even "one night in his life." Each moment we live exists, not the imaginary combination of these moments. (Kerrigan, p. 51)

I reject the whole in order to exalt each of the parts. (Irby, p. 232)

But there are some who will say that in remarks such as these, Borges is far from denying the reality of time. On the contrary, he is affirming exactly what you must if you take time seriously. I have in mind those philosophers

often called presentists, who hold that nothing exists but what exists at the present.⁸ In their view, to affirm the existence of the “vast temporal series” Borges talks about—otherwise known as McTaggart’s B-series, Williams’s “fabric of juxtaposed actualities,” or Quine’s total content of four-dimensional spacetime⁹—is precisely to do away with the element of passage that is essential to the reality of time.

Reply: To deny that the various events making up the history of the universe exist as a fabric of juxtaposed actualities is to be a friend rather than a foe of time—on this point I agree with the presentists. But there remains plenty in Borges’s argument to which presentists should take exception. Presentists certainly want to allow that many things were the case that are not the case now,¹⁰ and that certain things were the case before other things were the case—for example, that Berkeley died before Borges was born.¹¹ But the Borgesian idealist must deny precisely such facts as these, or at any rate must do so in cases in which no one was perceptually aware of them. So presentists had better find something to question in Borges’s argument after all.

Objection 4. I come now to the objection I think fundamental. There are two ways in which an idealist might account for the fact that *e* precedes *f* (or is succeeded by *f*). First, he might say that someone perceives that *e* is succeeded by *f*—a fact we may symbolize as

$P(eSf)$

Second, he might say that someone has a perception of *e* followed by a perception of *f*—a fact we may symbolize as

$p(e)Sp(f)$

In short, the idealist might appeal either to the perception of succession or the succession of perceptions. This is a distinction that will be familiar to readers of Kant and James.¹²

To come to the point, I believe that Berkeley accounts for temporality in the second way—as a succession of perceptions. But Borges, in extending the *esse-est-percipi* principle in the way that he does, assumes that an idealist can only account for temporality in the first way—as the perception of succession. He thereby saddles Berkeley with an assumption to which he is by no means committed.

That Berkeley accounts for time in the first way is suggested to me by the following passage—one of the few in which Berkeley discusses time explicitly:

Time therefore being nothing abstracted from the succession of ideas in our minds, it follows that the duration of any finite spirit must be estimated by the number of ideas or actions succeeding each other in that same spirit or mind. (*Principles of Human Knowledge*, section 98).

Berkeley's main target here is an absolute theory of time such as Newton's—he wants to rule out the possibility of empty time, or time without change, and change in his system can only be change in the mental states of a subject. Thus it is that there can be no time without a succession of ideas or perceptions in some mind. The important point for our purposes, however, is that Berkeley plainly enough seems to be allowing that there is such a thing as the succession of perceptions, and that if you have that, you have time—even if you do not have the perception of succession.

To elaborate, I believe that Berkeley would say something like this. If one perception, $p(e)$, is succeeded by another, $p(f)$ that is a basis sufficient unto itself for there being a case of genuine succession—of $p(e)$ by $p(f)$, and derivatively of e by f . Contrary to what Borges demands, it is not required that anyone perceive that e has been followed by f ; nor is it required that anyone perceive that $p(e)$ has been followed by $p(f)$. If I see a flash and later hear a bang, my two perceptions confer reality individually on the two events (flash and bang), and the fact that one perception preceded the other, whether itself perceived or no, suffices to make it the case that the flash preceded the bang. Facts about the temporal relations of perceivings in this scheme of things are basic—they do not require any further grounding in perception.¹³

What I am suggesting is that the extension of Berkeley's *esse-est-percipi* principle involved in passing from premise 1 to premise 2 is illegitimate. Berkeley does indeed hold that no sensible thing exists unless it is perceived—that is the master premise of his philosophy. But he is not committed to holding that no fact obtains unless it is perceived as obtaining. I now present three arguments in support of this contention.

First, it seems clear that Berkeley would want to allow that the following could be a fact: I have experienced seventeen twinges of pain in my shoulder since arising this morning. Yet what if no one was counting? Wouldn't Berkeley say that the seventeen individual experiences are enough to underwrite the fact that seventeen twinges occurred, even if there was no single summative experience—no experience of the fact that the total to date is seventeen? If so, we have an example of a fact that can obtain without being perceived to obtain.

Second, it may well be that Berkeley holds that monadic facts cannot obtain without being perceived to obtain. It is a characteristic Berkeleyan thesis that ideas are entirely passive and inert, which he supports in one place by the following argument:

For since they [our ideas] and every part of them exist only in the mind, it follows that there is nothing in them but what is perceived; but whoever shall attend to his ideas, whether of sense or reflection, will not perceive in them any power or activity. (*Principles of Human Knowledge*, section 25)

On the strength of passages such as this, Phillip Cummins has attributed

to Berkeley a thesis he calls "the Manifest Qualities Thesis:" no individual thing ever has any quality (or nonrelational property) unless it is perceived as having it.¹⁴ But I doubt, as Cummins does, that Berkeley would extend this thesis to cover relational properties, so as to imply that a relational fact can hold only if it is perceived as holding. Berkeley explicitly says in section 89 of the *Principles* that you can perceive the things related by a relation without perceiving the relation itself. And facts about succession and simultaneity are, of course, relational facts.

Third, if no fact whatever holds without being perceived to hold, we get an infinite regress that Berkeley would surely repudiate. Suppose an object *o* exists because someone, *S*, perceives *o*. If all facts, including even relational facts, depend on being perceived, we will have to say further: someone, *S'*, perceives that *S* perceives *o*; someone, *S''*, perceives that *S'* perceives that *S* perceives *o*, and so on, without end. Is there any impossibility in this? Arguably not; perhaps the perceivers in the series from *S'* onwards are all identical with God, who can have perceptions of unlimited complexity. On the other hand, if the idea is that all facts are constituted by the perception of them, the regress is arguably vicious. But whether it is vicious or not, I doubt that Berkeley would embrace any such regress. He holds that spirits are unperceivable, so not even God could perceive that a certain spirit perceives a certain object or fact.

I have been arguing so far that Borges is wrong to think that Berkeley's idealism must demolish the vast temporal system that many believe in. But what if Borges adopted as his own premise a more thoroughgoing idealism, with or without Berkeley's blessing? How would we answer him then?

The more thoroughgoing idealism would say that relational facts do not hold unless they are perceived as holding, and perhaps more ambitiously yet, that no fact whatever holds without being perceived as holding. In opposition to such super-idealism, I advance three points. First, it would engender the regress of perceivers (or at least of endlessly complicated facts perceived) that we have lately contemplated. In another of his essays, Borges expresses skepticism about precisely such a regress.¹⁵ Second, super-idealism would undermine some of the premises of Borges's own argument. "No one ever perceives the simultaneity of events separated by great distances"—does anyone ever perceive that fact? It seems that unrestricted negative existential propositions are not properly objects of perception themselves. Third, super-idealism would undermine itself. "No fact ever obtains without being perceived as obtaining"—however that is known, I doubt that it is through perception. Thus super-idealism is highly problematic, for reasons I think Borges himself would acknowledge.

I close this section with a look at one puzzling thing Borges says. Here in full is the passage about Suarez and DeQuincey:

At the beginning of August 1824, Captain Isidoro Suarez, at the head of a squadron of Peruvian hussars, decided the victory of Junin; at the beginning of August 1824, DeQuincey issued a diatribe against Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre; these deeds were not contemporaneous

(they are now), inasmuch as the two men died—the one in the city of Montevideo, the other in Edinburgh—knowing nothing about each other. (Kerrigan p. 50)

Why does he insert that parenthetical, “they are now”? I conjecture that he has reasoned as follows. The two events were not contemporaneous when they happened (if we can even speak of such a “when”), because no one then perceived them as being contemporaneous. “They are now” (i.e., it is now true that they were contemporaneous), because we are led to believe as much by history books or by Borges’s own essay.

I fear that Borges’s cleverness has here gotten the better of him. Let us set aside the objection that in the idealist framework within which he is working, it is perceiving and not believing that confers reality on temporal facts. Were Borges really to hold that a present cognitive attitude (be it belief, perception, or some other) can create past contemporaneity between events that were not contemporaneous before, he would contradict what he says a sentence later: “Neither vengeance nor pardon nor prisons nor even oblivion can modify the invulnerable past.”¹⁶

II. The Leibnizian Argument

I turn now to Borges’s second argument against the reality of time. Like the first argument, this one combines a philosopher’s principle with an empirical premise to deduce that an axiom of time order is violated.

Borges introduces the argument as follows:

Let us consider a life in whose course there is an abundance of repetitions: mine, for example. I never pass in front of the Recoleta without remembering that my father, my grandparents and great-grandparents are buried there . . . [E]very time the wind brings me the smell of eucalyptus, I think of Androque in my childhood (Irby, p. 223)

He goes on to suggest that he has had a number of totally *déjà vu* experiences, involving exactly the same combination of elements as in earlier experiences—the same sights, the same smells, the same thoughts of childhood, and so on. He concludes the argument as follows:

We can postulate, in the mind of an individual . . . two identical moments. Once this identity is postulated, we may ask: Are not these identical moments the same? Is not one single repeated term sufficient to break down and confuse the series of time? (Irby, pp. 223-24)

Here is how I reconstruct Borges’s reasoning:

1. There can be—and indeed there actually have been—episodes e and e' , one following the other by several years, that are perfectly indiscernible.
2. If e and e' are indiscernible, they are one and the same (by Leibniz's Principle of the Identity of Indiscernibles).
3. Therefore, $e = e'$ (from 1 and 2).
4. Therefore, e precedes itself (from 1 and 3)—in violation of the corollary of Axiom 2.

I now present and discuss several possible objections to this argument.

Objection 1. This objection is directed at the first premise. It is infinitely unlikely, some might say, that one experience would ever be a total repetition of another. Surely there must be some difference between e and e' , if only in the relations they bear to other objects or events in one's environment—for example, some difference in the earth's distance from Venus at the times of the two experiences, or some difference in the molecular composition of the blades of grass in the Recoleta.

It might be thought that elements of Borges's first argument could help in meeting this objection. Holding fast to his supposedly Berkeleyan principles, Borges could say that if no one perceived the proximity of e to these molecules and of e' to those, then no such relational differences between e and e' obtained. The relevant properties of e and e' are exhausted by the properties they are perceived as having.

It would be unwise, however, to bring in the first argument in this way, for the first argument causes more trouble than it quells. On what basis do we say that e preceded e' by so many years, given that in all probability no one perceived the succession of events that are alleged to intervene between them? Moreover, if no relations obtain but perceived relations, on what basis do we say that e and e' are indiscernible? The subject would have to discern their indiscernibility; is that not to imply that e' carried with it some recollection of e ? And yet we may stipulate that e itself was absorbed in the sights and scents of the moment, unaccompanied by any recollection.¹⁷

It would be better, then, to let the Leibnizian argument stand on its own, without any reliance on the Berkeleyan. Is there now any way to defend the first premise? Yes, there is. The defender could point out that the differences cited above between e and e' are all relational differences. We are still free to postulate (even if we do not find in our own lives) repeated events that are just alike in all their intrinsic features. Moreover, it is precisely such likeness in intrinsic features that Leibniz meant by indiscernibility, so the rest of the argument may proceed as before.

Unfortunately, this response to Objection 1 only exacerbates Objection 2,

to which I now turn.

Objection 2. This objection is directed at the second premise, in which Borges invokes the Principle of the Identity of Indiscernibles (PII). To set the stage for the objection, we must distinguish (as is commonly done) between two forms of this principle. According to the relational or weak form, if two objects or events are indiscernible in the sense that they share all their properties (relational as well as nonrelational), they are really one and the same. Putting it in the contrapositive mode, any objects or events that are genuinely distinct must differ in at least some of their properties, though perhaps only in relational properties. According to the nonrelational or strong form, if two objects or events are indiscernible in the sense that they share all their intrinsic properties, they are really one and the same. Putting it in the contrapositive mode again, any objects or events that are genuinely distinct must differ in at least one intrinsic property.

Leibniz's philosophy is committed to PII in its strong form. This is shown for one thing by the way in which Leibniz derives PII from the Principle of Sufficient Reason: if two grains of sand differed only in their relational properties (e.g., in their distances from the Great Pyramid), there could be no sufficient reason why one grain was placed here and the other there. Borges is also committed to PII in its strong form. This, at any rate, is the verdict we reached above in discussing Objection 1.

Now we are ready to state Objection 2. Although some philosophers maintain that PII in its weak form is a tenable principle, most find that PII in its strong form is thoroughly implausible.¹⁸ Is it not perfectly conceivable that there should be two billiard balls, or two raindrops, or two electrons that are perfectly alike in all their intrinsic properties? If so, the form of Leibniz's principle that Borges's argument requires has a strong presumption against it.

We may note as well that a proponent of the Leibnizian argument will fall into incoherence if he (a) concedes that Borges's indiscernible experiences do differ in their relational properties (e.g., in what else is happening elsewhere in the universe at the same time), yet (b) insists that the experiences are nonetheless numerically identical in virtue of sharing all their intrinsic properties. For he would then be holding that numerically identical items can differ in their relational properties, which is absurd. One thing Leibniz was certainly right about is the Indiscernibility of Identicals!

Objection 3. The two objections we have considered so far may be combined into a dilemma: if "indiscernible" means "having all the same properties", premise 1 is false, and if "indiscernible" means "having all the same intrinsic properties", premise 2 is false. The objection to be considered now arises even if we accept both premises and the conclusion that follows from them.

The conclusion is that there are events that precede themselves, which Borges takes to represent a breakdown, a confounding, or a disintegration of time. But does it really? Although I am inclined to agree with Borges on this point, it must be noted that there are thinkers who do not take the irreflexivity of temporal precedence as sacrosanct. Henri Bois objected to Nietzsche's doctrine of eternal return that it was not what it purported to be—that the

supposedly infinitely repeating linear sequence ABCDE A'B'C'D'E', etc. would really be a loop, given the identity of A and A', B and B', and so on, that would be required if we accept Leibniz's principle of indiscernibles.¹⁹ It is not my purpose to endorse this application of Leibniz's principle, which I have already questioned. It is rather to point out that Bois apparently takes seriously the possibility of an event's preceding itself: in his looping version of time, A precedes other events that precede A, and A therefore precedes itself.²⁰ In other words, the failure of our irreflexivity axiom is not taken to be a breakdown of time, but is taken instead to be precisely what is involved in looping time. In a similar vein, Gödel and others have pointed out there are solutions to the field equations of general relativity that involve closed timelike curves, in which an event is preceded by itself.²¹ If one assumes that what is possible for physics is possible for metaphysics—a contentious issue, of course—then there is nothing impossible about an event that happens before it happens.

At any rate, there is arguably nothing impossible about an event's preceding itself if it happens as part of a loop in time. Matters are otherwise if it happens as part of a linear series such as ABCDAXYZ, in which the second occurrence of A is identified with the first. Here numerically identical events would have different sequels, in violation of the Indiscernibility of Identicals. This would indeed be a “breakdown” of time, just as Borges alleges—but a breakdown forced upon us only if we accept the strong version of PII.

Conclusion. Borges tells us that he does not really believe the conclusion of his own arguments, but he also intimates that he wishes he could. I cannot help his unbelief. Though the logic of both of Borges's arguments is valid, neither of them is fully compelling in its premises. One rests on an implausibly strong idealism, the other on an implausibly strong version of Leibniz's indiscernibility principle. Consideration of his arguments can nonetheless be revealing—of the need even for idealists to admit facts not constituted by perception; of the significance of the distinction between relational and nonrelational versions of Leibniz's indiscernibility principle; and of the possibility that failures in the normal axioms of time order represent not the disintegration of time but of alternative topological structures for it.²²

Brown University

- 1 J. Agassi, "Philosophy as Literature: The Case of Borges," *Mind*, 79 (1970), 287-94.
- 2 Jorge Luis Borges, "A New Refutation of Time" in his *A Personal Anthology* (New York: Grove Press, 1967), edited by Anthony Kerrigan, pp. 44-64, and also in his *Labyrinths* (New York: New Directions, 1964), edited by Donald A. Yates and James E. Irby, pp. 217-34. My quotations below are taken sometimes from Kerrigan's translation and sometimes from Irby's.
- 3 If events are not instantaneous, we need a slightly more complicated formulation: either *e* begins before *f* does, or *f* begins before *e* does, or both begin at the same time.
- 4 "[O]nce space is denied, I don't see what right we have to that continuum which is time" (p. 49 in Kerrigan). Note, then, that some care must be taken in formulating premise 3 so that it is not overturned by the argument's own momentum. It must not be understood as saying that there are events so widely separated in space that no one perceives their temporal relations; it must rather be taken as a negative existential all the way. (Thanks to Tim Chambers and Marian David for asking me to note the implications of Borges's argument for space.)
- 5 Here is the penultimate speech by Philonous in the *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous*: "My endeavors tend only to unite and place in a clearer light that truth which was before shared between the vulgar and the philosophers, the former being of opinion that those things they immediately perceive are the real things, and the latter, that the things immediately perceived are ideas which exist only in the mind. Which two notions put together do, in effect, constitute the substance of what I advance." The two notions can be put together, of course, only if we assume that things existing "only in the mind" (i.e., only if perceived) can be real.
- 6 "I deny the existence of one single time, in which all events are linked" (Kerrigan, p. 50).
- 7 The liberalization here does not consist in letting different cases of perceived precedence be sustained by different perceivers: that much liberality we were already allowing. It consists rather in replacing the relation "(ES)(S perceives that *x* precedes *y*)" by its ancestral. The ancestral of any relation is guaranteed to be transitive even if the original relation is not.
- 8 For exposition and defense of presentism, see A.N. Prior, *Past, Present, and Future* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967) or John Bigelow, "Presentism and Properties," *Philosophical Perspectives*, vol. 10, edited by James E. Tomberlin (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), pp. 35-52.
- 9 For discussion of the views of these three authors, see my "If Meinong is Wrong, Is McTaggart Right?," *Philosophical Topics*, 24 (1966), pp. 231-53.
- 10 A.N. Prior, a staunch presentist, makes this declaration: "[A]lthough Whitrow's lecture isn't now present and so isn't real, isn't a fact, nevertheless its pastness, its having taken place, is a present fact, is a reality, and will be one as long as time shall last." See "The Notion of the Present," *Studium Generale*, 23 (1970), 245-48.
- 11 Presentists will contrive to say such things merely by using tense operators and not by affirming the existence of past realities. For example, "Borges was a librarian before he became blind" might be rendered as "it was the case that [Borges is blind & Borges is not a librarian & it was the case that (Borges is a librarian & Borges is not blind)]." This is a variant of a proposal of Prior's on p. 41 of *Past, Present, and Future*.
- 12 For references and further discussion, see chapter 5 of my *Problems from Kant* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

13A question pressed by some of my readers and hearers is this: if Borges maintains that time is unreal, do we not beg the question against him by assuming that there are cases in which one perception precedes another? My answer is that Borges, unlike, say, McTaggart, does not hold that there is anything impossible about one thing's preceding another. On the contrary, he admits that it sometimes happens, if only within a specious present. So no question is begged by assuming cases of precedence, although it may be begged by assuming cases of precedence that are not perceived. I shall argue at the end of this section, however, that a reasonable idealist should allow that some relations hold even if not perceived as holding.

14 Phillip Cummins, "Berkeley's Manifest Qualities thesis," *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 28 (1990), 385-401.

15"Time and J.W. Dunne," in *Selected Non-Fictions*, edited by Eliot Weinberger (New York: Viking Penguin, 1999), pp. 217-19. This essay was published in 1940, six years before the "New Refutation of Time."

16It is worth noting that if we combine the temporal axiom "what is once the case will always have been the case" (to which Borges here pays his respects) with the empirical premise that cognitions of a state of affairs do not last forever, we obtain one more reason not to embrace super-idealism.

17In his 1936 essay "The Doctrine of Cycles," Borges himself makes a similar point against the supposition of a totally déjà vu experience: "[M]emory would import a novelty that negates the hypothesis" (p. 122 in Weinberger). Could we avoid the difficulty by saying that the subject discerns the indiscernibility of the experiences only at a time subsequent to both, or would that only raise the problem discussed at the end of Part I?

18 I myself think that both forms of PII are implausible, and that those who attempt to uphold weak PII while disavowing strong are in an untenable position. See my "Identity of Indiscernibles and the Patchwork Principle," forthcoming.

19In "The Doctrine of Cycles" Borges expresses similar doubts about Eternal Return, based like Bois's on the Identity of Indiscernibles and also (as in the "New Refutation") on some sort of idealism or verificationism: "If Zarathustra's hypothesis is accepted, I do not fully understand how two identical processes keep from agglomerating into one. Is mere succession, verified by no one, enough? Without a special archangel to keep track, what does it mean that we are going through the thirteen thousand five hundred and fourteenth cycle and not the first in the series or number three hundred twenty-two to the two thousandth power?" (p. 122 in Weinberger).

20 For a brief account of Bois's views, see Bas C. van Fraassen, *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Time and Space* (New York: Random House, 1970), pp. 62-66. Bois may have thought he was reducing Nietzsche's eternal return to absurdity rather than to circular time. For an explicit endorsement of the possibility of circular time based on the Identity of Indiscernibles, see Bertrand Russell, *An Inquiry into Meaning and Truth* (Baltimore, Penguin, 1967; reprint of 1940 edition published by Allen & Unwin), pp. 96-97.

²¹Kurt Gödel, "A Remark about the Relationship between Relativity Theory and Idealistic Philosophy," in *Albert Einstein—Philosopher-Scientist*, edited by P.A. Schilpp (LaSalle, Ill.: Open Court, 1949), pp. 557-62. Although Gödel's results are often taken as establishing the possibility of closed timelike curves, Gödel himself regarded them as showing that time is unreal. He was thus a kindred spirit of Borges. For a good account

of Gödel's views, see Palle Yourgrau, *Gödel Meets Einstein* (Chicago and LaSalle, Illinois: Open Court, 1999).

We could avoid the self-precedence apparently involved in closed timelike curves by denying the transitivity of precedence, but either way we would be denying one of the axioms with which this essay began.

²² I am indebted to colloquium audiences at the University of Notre Dame and at the State University of New York College at Brockport for their reactions to earlier versions of this material. Special thanks go to Tim Chambers for providing me with valuable criticisms and with the additional Borges references in notes 15, 17, and 19.