



THINKING BEANS

A YEAR OF CLASSROOM
PHILOSOPHY LESSONS

DAVID BIRCH

TIME

Topic Though we are often preoccupied with how much or how little we have of it, we are less inclined to ask what it is. Yet over the centuries philosophers have spent a lot of time trying to understand exactly what it is they are spending, and in the process they've developed a variety of different theories on time's nature and being.

Presentism, for instance, is the view that neither yesterday nor tomorrow exist: only *now* exists. Eternalism, on the other hand, claims that the past, present and future do exist. Then there's substantivalism, the theory that time exists as an absolute entity independent of the events that occur within it, such that if everything were to freeze – the planets paused in their orbits, the swallows motionless in their migration – time should nevertheless continue to flow.

Props A photograph

Action 1 Begin by simply asking 'What is time?' This usually generates many different ideas. You can focus your students' thinking by asking, 'Can you see it?', 'Can you feel it?', or the question below:

- *Question 1* Was time invented or discovered?
 - If it was invented, could it have been invented differently?
 - If it was invented, can it be disposed of?
 - If it was discovered, how was it discovered?
 - Is it possible to live without being aware of the existence of time?
 - Can everything be classified as either invented or discovered?

Action 2 Show the class a photograph of anything you wish, from the berthed Titanic to your new cat.

- Question 2 When you look at the photograph are you looking at the past?

Action 3 Present either or both of these arguments to the class –

The past is in the photograph, and the photograph is in the present, therefore the past is in the present.

My memories exist now, and the past is in my memories, therefore the past exists now.

- Question 3 Is this correct?

Action 4 Present the following argument to the class –

1. The past no longer exists.
2. You cannot have what does not exist.
3. Therefore, you have no past.

- Question 4 Is this correct?

- Does yesterday still exist?
- If the past does exist, where is it?
- If you made a promise yesterday, and yesterday no longer exists, does that mean the promise no longer exists?
- If yesterday you wrote a novel, but yesterday no longer exists, does that mean you are not its author?

- If the past exists in our memories, would universal amnesia erase the past?
- Does the past exist in its effects? Does yesterday's storm exist as today's floods?

Action 5 Present the following argument to the class –

1. The future does not yet exist.
2. You cannot have what does not exist.
3. Therefore, you have no future.

– *Question 5* Is this correct?

- Does tomorrow exist?
- If the future does exist, where is it?
- If the future doesn't exist, does this mean that a being like God who knew everything would not know what will happen to tomorrow?
- Where does the future come from?

One of the benefits of using the above format to present arguments is that it makes the different components of the argument clear. Explain to the class that if they disagree with the conclusion, then they must disagree with either premise 1 or premise 2.

If you think your class may struggle with this format, you can alternatively present the arguments to them as sentences e.g. 'Since the past no longer exists, and you cannot have what does not exist, it follows that you have no past'.