

Are Events Things of the Past?

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A popular claim in recent philosophy of mind and action is that events only exist once they are over. This has been taken to have the consequence that many temporal phenomena cannot be understood ‘from the inside’, as they are unfolding, purely in terms of events. However, as I argue here, the claim that events exist only when over is incoherent. I consider two ways of understanding the claim, and the notion of existence it involves: one that ties existence to the logic of quantification, and another that assimilates the existence of an event to that of a continuant. The first of these I argue cannot be the right way to understand the target claim, as there are serious logical obstacles to regarding this notion of existence as temporally variable. The second, on the other hand, leaves it ultimately mysterious what the existence of an event could amount to. I close with the suggestion that the undeniable temporal asymmetries which parties to the debate are interested in are properly understood in perspectival, not ontological, terms.

1 The question of the title is not like the questions whether miracles or dinosaurs are
2 things of the past. It is not asking whether there used to be events, but now they are
3 all gone. Rather the question is whether there is some kind of intrinsic connection
4 between events and pastness.

5 That there is some such connection has been asserted recently by a number of
6 philosophers, especially within the philosophy of action. For instance, John Mc-
7 Dowell writes,

8 Reality comes to contain, as it were, a particular action of the type describable as
9 ‘my crossing the street’ only when it gets to be true to say ‘I have crossed the street.’
10 (McDowell 2011, p. 7)

11 while Anton Ford writes,

1 As long as someone is closing a door...there is, as yet, no event of the door's clos-
2 ing. (Ford 2014, p. 33)

3 and similarly according to Eric Marcus:

4 If no one has crossed Columbus Avenue, there is not yet a crossing of Columbus
5 Avenue, i.e., the answer to the question 'how many times has Columbus Avenue been
6 crossed?' is 'none.' (Marcus 2012, p. 217)

7 Jennifer Hornsby, meanwhile, writes,

8 When a stretch of ongoing activity is over, an event is on the scene. (Hornsby
9 2013, p. 9)

10 And as Michael Thompson—in a more formal idiom—has it:

11 'I am doing A' is no more, or less 'general' than 'I intend to do A' is; the transition
12 to a genuine particular comes with 'I did A.' (Thompson 2008, p. 137)

13 For the purposes of this paper, I will take all of the above to express, or involve,
14 a commitment to the following claim:

15 **(E)** If an event e exists at a time t , then e is over at t ; that is, e has occurred, but is
16 no longer occurring, at t .¹

17 This is, in effect, the claim that events are things of the past. For it says that
18 whenever an event exists, that event, having already occurred, must be located
19 wholly in the past.

20 (E), if correct, threatens radical consequences for the philosophy of mind and
21 action. It suggests that the category of event is of no use when it comes to un-
22 derstanding phenomena that involve the experience of ongoing change. Rowland
23 Stout, for instance, in a recent introduction to a collection, writes, 'the standard
24 philosophical accounts that treat actions and experiences as events and states lose,
25 or at any rate misread, the *subjective* aspect of these phenomena, something that
26 can only be captured by thinking of these phenomena from inside the course of

¹The assumption here is that the relevant sense of 'over' is one on which no event is ever both over and occurring. I leave aside difficulties concerning the last moment of an event.

1 their happening.’ Consequently, philosophers who endorse (E) often also propose
2 enriching our temporal ontology with an additional category, that of *process*.²

3 Rather than assess the prospects for processes, this paper will focus just on
4 events. I shall argue that (E) is incoherent. The basic form of the objection is very
5 simple: events, if they are anything at all, must be things that occur. But, according
6 to (E), events exist only once they have *stopped* occurring; events never exist and
7 occur at the same time. And this makes it obscure how events could occur at all.³

8 This complaint is flat-footed, yet it cannot be satisfactorily answered. The paper
9 will develop this line of thought, and draw out the consequences it has for the place
10 of events in a naïve metaphysics of the temporal world.

11 In §1, I outline a background conception of events as concrete particulars,
12 which will guide the subsequent discussion. In §2 I explain the wider dialectical
13 context surrounding (E), specifically its relation to the further claim that events are
14 unavailable to thought and experience while they are occurring. §3 and §4 evalu-
15 ate (E) in the context of an orthodox, Quinean understanding of existence in terms
16 of the logic of quantification. I argue that this cannot be the right way to under-
17 stand it, since the quantificational conception is not one that admits of temporal
18 modification.

19 Having set aside the quantificational conception of existence, in §5 I outline a
20 more substantial, quasi-Aristotelian notion of existence that plausibly is involved
21 in our thinking about perishable substances. I then consider, in §6, whether such
22 a notion of existence might be applicable to events in a way that supports (E). I
23 argue that it cannot, for the reason that something’s substantially existing only as

²There is not much unity in the way the term ‘process’ is used by its advocates. Some influential, but contrasting, recent pleas for processes include (Crowther 2011; Galton and Mizoguchi 2009; Hornsby 2012, 2013; Steward 2012, 2013; Stout 1997, 2003, 2016). These different proposals are discussed and developed further in the papers collected in (Stout 2018). An important early discussion is (O’Shaughnessy 1971), although his concerns are somewhat different and he does not obviously insist on a categorial distinction between processes and events.

³Alec Hinshelwood (Hinshelwood 2018) detects a similar incoherency in the claim that events belong to the past (ch. 1, §§3.1–3.2). Hinshelwood diagnoses this claim as originating in an attempt to combine a tensed metaphysics of time with a view of events on which they ‘fall under their kinds in virtue of their actual temporal boundaries’, and offers a non-standard view of events which he claims resolves the difficulty (ch. 5.) It does seem plausible to me that there are inherent and hard-to-defuse tensions between a tensed metaphysics and the notion of a temporal particular, although these issues lie beyond the scope of this paper. I discuss these in my (Bacharach 2020), cf. ch. 6.

1 past is inconsistent with a basic feature of our thinking about the past, namely that
2 whatever is now past was once actually present. In §7 I consider a deflationary
3 response to this challenge; I argue that this response, whilst perhaps a coherent
4 position, is not adequate to capture the intuitive idea that events are particulars.
5 Since the deflationary view represents a genuine alternative to the conception of
6 events outlined in §1 and assumed in the rest of the paper, seeing what is wrong
7 with the deflationary view also helps to motivate that conception. I close with some
8 remarks about what, according to the background conception presupposed here, is
9 the correct way to think about events' existence in time.

10 **1. Events as concrete particulars**

11 The basic idea that I take to animate an ontology of events is, to paraphrase Don-
12 ald Davidson: not only do things happen, but there are particular happenings;
13 agents do things, and moreover there are agents' particular doings (Davidson 1980c,
14 p. 181). Notwithstanding other equally legitimate uses, for instance in probability
15 theory textbooks, I will use the term 'event' to cover the most general category
16 of particular, unrepeatable happenings or doings—arm-raising, glass-breaking, elections,
17 earthquakes, sayings, and so on.

18 The recognition of particular events, in addition to the general phenomenon of
19 change, is not a *recherché* piece of metaphysics, motivated on refined theoretical
20 grounds. Rather, it is an aspect of our ordinary thinking about the temporal world.
21 Such thinking is not limited to tracking the flow of things in change and at rest; we
22 understand our lives as punctuated by and articulated into distinct and distinguish-
23 able episodes, each with its own particular weight and significance. This dimen-
24 sion of particularity is especially salient in everyday, engaged thinking about our
25 personal past: we are often concerned, not just with the general fact that such-and-
26 such a kind of thing happened at least once, but also with the individual episodes in
27 virtue of which those general facts hold. Emotions of regret and pride, blame and
28 gratitude, are organised around the recognition of such particular, unrepeatable

1 episodes as make up the fabric of our finite and bounded lives.⁴

2 To say this much is just to indicate, impressionistically, how the category of
3 event—of a bounded temporal particular—is to a large extent one we already op-
4 erate with before any subtle philosophy is on the scene. This is of course not to
5 foreclose the possibility that philosophical reflection may lead us in the final ana-
6 lysis to revise, or abandon altogether, the category of event. My aim here is not
7 to investigate the prospects for such revisions. Rather, it is to adumbrate a naïve
8 and intuitive conception of events, with a view to seeing whether it can tenably be
9 combined with the doctrine that events exist only in the past.

10 Elaborating a little more, the conception I have in mind is one in which events
11 are *concrete particulars*. While I want to leave this notion deliberately vague, allow-
12 ing for various divergent views of what exactly being a concrete particular amounts
13 to, I understand it to incorporate at least the following, only somewhat less vague,
14 ideas:

- 15 • Events are not abstract entities of any of various familiar varieites. They are
16 not, for instance, sets; or some other type of mathematical construction (for
17 instance, objects introduced by Fregean contextual definition); or proposi-
18 tions, or states of affairs, or situations, or facts (if the latter are taken to be
19 proposition-like, rather than concrete, entities.)⁵
- 20 • Events, as particulars, admit of a non-trivial distinction between qualitative
21 and numerical identity. Consequently, there may be events that are entirely
22 similar in their intrinsic structure, but nevertheless numerically distinct.⁶
- 23 • Events occupy time in a manner at least roughly analogous to how material
24 objects occupy space. They are not, for instance, related to the times or inter-
25 vals of time at which they occur by containing those times as constituents;

⁴This is a theme explored further in my (op. cit.), cf. chs. 3–4.

⁵For various views that take events to be in some way abstract: (Barwise and Perry 1983; Chisholm 1970, 1990; Taylor 1985; N. L. Wilson 1974). (Kim 1976) talks of events as triples of substances, properties, and times, although it is not clear how seriously he intends this as an identification. The idea of introducing events by contextual definition was suggested to me by an anonymous reviewer for this journal.

⁶For contrasting views of events as repeatable: (Chisholm 1970; Lewis 1987; Montague 1969). This also goes with the standard use of the term ‘event’ in probability theory.

1 or by being true at those times, or ‘obtaining’ at those times (in the way that
2 states or facts may be said to obtain at times or over intervals of time.)

- 3 • Events stand in part-whole relations to other events; and, if an event is a
4 proper part of some larger event, the interval of time it occupies is a proper
5 part of the interval of time occupied by the larger event.⁷

6 There is nothing like strict entailment holding between these various ideas, and
7 each of them is capable of being further fleshed out in various ways. Nevertheless
8 they loosely hang together to characterise the core of an intuitive conception of
9 events as real, empirical entities, out there to be met with in the world as we exper-
10 ience it.

11 We should disentangle this core conception of events as concrete particulars
12 from various doctrines that have been associated with it by its proponents or de-
13 tractors. For instance, there is the view that events are the primary causal relata,
14 and that causation always involves a relation between two separate events (rather
15 than, say, a single event of an agent causing a change in a patient.)⁸ And there is
16 the idea that events are ‘modally fragile’, necessarily having the same parts, bound-
17 aries and intrinsic features they actually have.⁹ Neither of these is at all obviously
18 required by the idea of an event as a concrete temporal particular.

19 This core conception also makes the category of event intelligible independ-
20 ently of any particular theoretical purpose to which they might be recruited, and
21 our belief in events accordingly more robust than our faith in the viability of those
22 research programmes. It may be an open question, for instance, whether events are

⁷For a theory of part-whole for events, see (Bach 1986). Cf. also the discussion of occurrences in (Simons 1987, ch. 4.1).

⁸These ideas are closely associated with Davidson (e.g. (Davidson 1980a)); the assumption that irreducible transactions, or ‘causings’, would not be events, seems to operate in e.g. (Alvarez and Hyman 1998; Ford 2014; Hyman 2015). (Child 1994, ch. 3) convincingly argues that there is no reason a broadly Davidsonian approach to events and causality cannot countenance such events.

⁹This view may be taken to be implied by some remarks in (Davidson 2005, p. 200); and it is tentatively endorsed in (Simons, op. cit.). (Steward 2012, 2013) associates modal fragility with events, and takes the contrary property of ‘robustness’ to be a characteristic mark of the distinct category of *process*.

1 suitable entities to serve as semantic values in the analysis of action sentences;¹⁰ or
2 whether they are appropriate terms of psychophysical identity claims in the philo-
3 sophy of mind.¹¹ On the way of thinking just sketched, the structure of events and
4 their relations is there in the world to be found, before any sophisticated theorising
5 about language, or the relation between mind and brain, has got off the ground;
6 and it is this structure of events which we discern and respond to in, for instance,
7 seeking to make narrative sense of our lives.

8 **2. Thinking about events**

9 The question is whether this background conception is compatible with the doc-
10 trine that events exist only in the past. But before evaluating that claim, it is worth
11 making some remarks about the context in which it is typically made. This will
12 bring into focus the dialectical demands on the notion of existence in play.

13 The claim labelled (E), that an event only exists once it is over, is closely related
14 to a different claim: that it is only possible to think about an event once it is over. In-
15 deed one cannot always be certain which of these claims is intended by the authors
16 quoted at the beginning of this paper. Saying that an event is only ‘on the scene’
17 once it is over, for instance, could be meant just as a claim about what is available to
18 be thought about at a given time. And the quantificational idiom, ‘There is not yet
19 an event...’ could equally be understood to involve a tacit restriction to the domain
20 of thinkable entities.

21 The idea that events are not available as objects of thought until they are over
22 is certainly in tension with a conception of events as empirical entities which we
23 might encounter in experience—rather than as theoretical artefacts or posits, per-
24 haps on a par with times or locations. For if we experience events at all, we surely ex-
25 perience them in the present, while they are happening. And if one can experience
26 an event while it is going on, it is hard to see what would prevent one from formu-

¹⁰e.g. (Davidson 1980e); followers of the Davidsonian event-semantics programme include (Higginbotham 2009; Parsons 1990).

¹¹(Davidson 1980d). Cogent worries about whether events are suitable relata for such identities are raised by (Hornsby 1981; Steward 1997).

1 lating thoughts about the event which one is experiencing.¹² One would therefore
2 expect the thesis that events cannot be thought about while they are still occurring
3 to be endorsed along with the thesis that events cannot be experienced while they
4 are occurring—and, indeed, cannot be experienced at all. It is presumably for such
5 reasons that Stout and others think that an account of the temporal world solely in
6 terms of events misses something out, and stands in need of supplementation with
7 the further category of *process*.

8 What is the dialectical relation between the metaphysical claim (E), which
9 concerns the sheer nonexistence of events, and claims about their absence from
10 thought and experience? An obvious suggestion is that the first of these underlies
11 the second, that the reason events are absent from the domain of thinkable entities
12 until they are over is because they are not in the world at all.

13 We find what looks like a version of this line of thought offered by John Mc-
14 Dowell. Discussing the thesis that intentions in action relate *de re* to particular
15 actions,¹³ he writes,

16 By the time there is a particular action of crossing the street for a thought of
17 crossing the street to be directed at, one has crossed the street, and it is too late for
18 the thought to have the nature of an intention. (McDowell 2011, pp. 7–8)

19 On a fairly natural construal, McDowell looks here to be arguing from a metaphys-
20 ical premise, (E), to a conclusion about the limits of thought. Call this the *argument*
21 *from nonexistence*. The argument from nonexistence, if sound, would constitute a
22 powerful motivation for scepticism about the completeness of a picture of the tem-
23 poral world as solely comprising events, and hence for introducing the category of
24 process.

25 One may of course have doubts about the purely formal cogency of the argu-
26 ment from nonexistence. It is not obvious that we can think only about things

¹²This is not necessarily to assume it is always the case that, if one is experiencing some object, one is thereby in a position to think about it. There may be cases where one's experience of an object is, for instance, not sufficiently rich or determinate to put one in a position to single it out for thought. Or singling out the object may require possessing concepts which one lacks at the time of the experience. It is harder to see, though, how the quite general claim that events are never available to thought until they are over is compatible with their presence in experience.

¹³The official target of McDowell's discussion is (G. Wilson 1989). The idea may also be found in (Baier 1977).

1 which exist—fictional characters and so on are obvious counterexamples—and
2 even less obvious that we cannot think about things which do not yet exist but will
3 exist, for instance if one is in possession of a uniquely identifying description.¹⁴ But
4 I want to allow that there is some appropriately qualified version of the argument
5 on which the transition from nonexistence to unthinkability is justified.¹⁵

6 However, it is not entirely clear-cut that the argument from nonexistence is
7 really what is on offer, here or elsewhere. For instance, in a subsequent passage,
8 McDowell looks to argue more directly for the impossibility of thinking about on-
9 going events, in a way that does not obviously turn on any prior metaphysical com-
10 mitments:

11 ...at the time-bound perspective at which one might say “I am crossing the street”,
12 the logical form of what one is saying cannot await a determination by what is going
13 to happen...So it must be wrong to suppose that [the state expressed by that state-
14 ment’s] being an intention in action consists in the presence of a *de re* relation to a
15 particular action. (Op. cit., pp. 8–9)

16 We might articulate this new thought as follows: When an event is in progress,
17 nothing available to a thinker at that time determines when its later boundary will
18 be, since the event could be interrupted. If events are individuated by their tem-
19 poral boundaries, that may be taken to imply that nothing available to a thinker at
20 the time determines which of many possible particular events is in progress, hence
21 no individual event can be singled out as the one that is occurring. Call this line of
22 reasoning the *argument from interruption*.¹⁶

23 Perhaps the argument from interruption is closer to the heart of what is driving
24 McDowell and others. If that is right, then perhaps we should indeed understand
25 the various remarks quoted at the beginning of this paper as involving an impli-
26 cit quantifier restriction to the domain of thinkable, or individuatable, entities. On
27 this construal, such remarks do not state an independently motivated metaphysical

¹⁴Cf. (Kaplan 1968)’s descriptively introduced name ‘Newman-1’.

¹⁵Moreover, note that a parallel argument to the conclusion that one cannot *experience* ongoing events does not appear to be subject to the same counterexamples. Thanks to an anonymous referee for this point.

¹⁶Note that, as formulated, the argument appears to depend on the assumption that events are modally fragile. As I noted in §1, this assumption is not obviously well-motivated. But this is not the main point on which I want to press the argument.

1 commitment, one which might feature as a premise in the argument from nonexist-
2 ence. So perhaps taking this wider dialectical context into account shows (E) and
3 the argument from nonexistence to be a red herring.

4 Nevertheless, one may suspect metaphysical intuitions lurking in the back-
5 ground of the argument from interruption. Much of its intuitive force derives from
6 taking the putative indeterminacy in a subject's awareness of an extended ongoing
7 event to reflect an indeterminacy in what structure is really there in the world to be
8 discerned. This is, in effect, tacitly to assume the metaphysical claim of (E)—that
9 an event does not exist, *simpliciter*, until it is over—as underpinning the argument.
10 But if we are alive to the possibility that (E) is false, and hence that there really is
11 a certain particular event there all along, such arguments may be less compelling
12 than they appear.

13 Compare vision. When we visually perceive ordinary, voluminous objects, not
14 all of their boundaries are present to us at any one time. Consequently, it is possible
15 for a single visual experience of an object with its back parts carefully cut away to be
16 subjectively indiscernible from an experience of the whole thing intact. We need
17 not, moreover, think of a subject who is deceived by such trick objects as necessarily
18 suffering any perceptual illusion. Even so, we need not infer from the possibility
19 of being mistaken about a perceived object's actual boundaries that, under normal
20 conditions, a subject may not succeed in perceiving whole ordinary objects, and in
21 singling them out for thought on the basis of vision alone. Rather, what such cases
22 teach us is that what a subject counts as experientially and cognitively in touch
23 with depends in part on the structure provided by the surrounding environment,
24 and not merely on what is phenomenally available to them in the narrow sense
25 in which two subjectively indiscriminable experiences cannot differ in what they
26 make phenomenally available to the subject.¹⁷

27 Just so, if we accept that the whole event already exists when a subject encoun-
28 ters some earlier portion of it, it is far from clear what would prevent us from seeing
29 the actual kind and identity of the larger event as playing a role in fixing what lar-
30 ger whole the subject is, at that moment, experientially in touch with and capable

¹⁷A justly celebrated discussion of these issues is (Clarke 1965). Cf. also (Martin 2017).

1 of thinking about. At any rate, it would need to be made out how any supposed
2 indeterminacy in the experience of an ongoing event differs from any such inde-
3 terminacy in the visual perception of a three-dimensional object's near surfaces.

4 I am not proposing any substantial analogy between the two cases, of experien-
5 cing a voluminous object and experiencing an extended event. There are doubtless
6 many important differences between how thought and awareness of wholes is re-
7 lated to, or mediated by, awareness of parts in each case. The point rather is the
8 dialectical one, that the argument from interruption, shorn of the metaphysical
9 support of (E), seems to rest on an assumption that what a subject's experience
10 makes available for them to think about cannot ever exceed what it makes avail-
11 able in subjectively indiscriminable 'bad' cases; and that, in the case of material
12 objects and their parts, that assumption does not seem compelling.

13 The claim that ongoing events cannot be singled out for thought may thus be
14 seen to draw some of its appeal from an oscillation between thinking of the claim
15 as motivated on independent metaphysical grounds—there is just not yet enough
16 stuff in the world to be thought about—and thinking of it as motivated by consid-
17 erations which properly concern just the limited individuating powers of a finite
18 subject at a single point in time. The oscillation consists in allowing a background
19 metaphysical picture to bolster the intuitions that make the argument from inter-
20 ruption seem compelling, while at the same time disavowing the need to make that
21 background picture coherent.

22 This is not to say there are no other routes to the claim that occurring events
23 cannot be thought about, or the more restricted claim that intentions in action
24 do not relate *de re* to particular actions. Whether that is so remains to be seen.
25 But the central question that emerges from this section is whether the background
26 picture—that summarised by the claim (E)—*can* be made coherent, in a way that
27 supports the argument from nonexistence. I will argue that it cannot.

1 3. Existence and quantification

2 An influential way of understanding claims of existence, due primarily to W. V.
3 O. Quine, is in terms of the first-order existential quantifier. Following Russell
4 (Russell 1940), Quine argued that incoherence results when ‘exists’ is construed as
5 a predicate of individuals, ascribing some property that an entity may possess or
6 lack. Ontological commitment is revealed instead in the logic of generality: ‘this is,
7 essentially, the *only* way we can involve ourselves in ontological commitments:
8 by our use of bound variables...to be is, purely and simply, to be the value of a
9 variable.’ (Quine 1948, pp. 31–32) On this conception, the quantificational form
10 ‘there are *F*s’ has priority over the predicational form ‘*a* exists’.¹⁸

11 The Quinean conception of existence would seem to secure the connota-
12 tion that only existent entities can be thought about. Setting aside complica-
13 tions concerning fictional characters and so on, it is a mark of singular thoughts
14 and experiences—that is, thoughts and experiences which relate subjects to
15 particulars—that they can appropriately be described in such a way such that ex-
16 istential generalisation on the object of the singular thought preserves truth. For
17 instance, if I am thinking a singular thought about a particular book, then there is
18 a particular book about which I am thinking. To put this another way: in order for
19 a subject to enjoy thoughts and experiences of a particular, there must be such an
20 item as the object of their thought and experience. If there were no such item, then
21 there would be nothing for them to be thinking about or experiencing.¹⁹

22 This conception also dovetails nicely with what has been an influential motiva-
23 tion for an ontology of events, namely the semantics of verbal sentences. Davidson
24 (Davidson 1980e) argued that these sentences are to be analysed as involving an ex-
25 istential quantifier ranging over events.

26 A key observation of Davidson’s is that a sentence such as,

¹⁸See, however, (Evans 1982; Geach 1954; Moore 1936; Strawson 1967). More recently, (Crane 2012, 2013; Priest 2016) argue against the doctrine that existential commitment is expressed by quantification.

¹⁹For this conception of singular thought, see in particular (Evans 1982; McDowell 1998b,c); (Martin 2002) for critical discussion.

1 (1) Guthrie fell over.

2 asserts that Guthrie fell over at least once, but not how many times he fell over.
3 However, it is subject to adverbial count-modification, providing this lacking in-
4 formation, e.g.:

5 (2) Guthrie fell over three times.

6 These facts, among others, suggest that we should think of sentences like (1) and
7 (2) as a kind of existential quantification—quantification over events. Hence (1) is
8 analysed as:

9 (3) $\exists e(\text{Fell over}(\text{Guthrie}, e))$

10 i.e., that there was an event of Guthrie's falling over; and (2), similarly, as the state-
11 ment that there were (at least) three events of Guthrie's falling over.

12 It is notable that this analysis is most readily applicable to past-tensed sentences.
13 Specifically, the main present-tensed counterpart of the verbal phrase *fall over* is the
14 progressive-aspect:

15 (4) Guthrie is falling over.²⁰

16 This, however, is not susceptible to the same count-modification:

17 (5) Guthrie is falling over three times. (?)²¹

18 This difference between perfective and imperfective aspect is suggestively analog-
19 ous to that between count- and mass-quantification. This has led some to suggest
20 that the progressive aspect does not quantify over events, but rather over stuff-like
21 processes.²² Moreover, the progressive exhibits the so-called 'imperfective para-
22 dox': statement (4) is not proven false if Guthrie does not in fact fall over (being

²⁰The simple present 'Guthrie falls over' is normally—although not universally—given a habitual or generic reading, relating to a general pattern or tendency rather than a specific occurrence.

²¹On the other hand, 'Guthrie is falling over for the third time' is perfectly acceptable. This suggests that the linguistic data may be more equivocal than they initially appear; but I will not pursue this line of enquiry here.

²²Observation of this analogy is due principally to (Mourelatos 1978); cf. also (Bach 1986).

1 propped up at the last minute by a helpful companion.) Thus it seems that the
2 truth of (4), unlike that of (1), is independent of the actual existence of any event
3 of Guthrie's falling over.

4 These brief considerations suggest that the past tense, but not the present, is ap-
5 propriately understood as directly quantifying over events; and this may be thought
6 to provide some support for (E).²³ If we understand existence along Quinean lines,
7 then the thought is simply this: past-tensed perfective verb forms, but not the
8 present tense, involve quantification over events. Since existential commitment
9 is revealed only by quantification, we should thus only recognise the existence of
10 those events which are reported by the past perfective. It thus seems to follow, as
11 per the argument attributed to McDowell, that there is no thinking about an event
12 until it is over.

13 But this line of thought is not conclusive. In particular, it is questionable
14 whether (E) can be fully understood just in terms of the quantificational structure
15 of verbal statements. The following section will expand this point.

16 **4. General and singular existence**

17 The Quinean analysis of existence applies in the first instance to *general* existence
18 claims. Indeed, the Russell-Quine view is motivated at least in part by a desire to
19 avoid the difficulties associated with singular existentials. But it is not clear that, in
20 the present context, questions of singular existence can fully be circumvented.

21 To see this, consider a general principle about existential claims: that, if true,
22 they have true singular witnesses. Thus:

23 **(\exists -Witness)** For any true statement²⁴ of the form ' $\exists x\varphi(x)$ ', there is at least one

²³Marcus in particular seems to motivate the claim in this way (op. cit., p. 217).

²⁴I follow (Rumfitt 2010) in using 'statement' to mean an interpreted sentence-type with all (truth-conditionally relevant) contextual parameters fixed. As will become apparent, my use of the notion is highly idealised, such that there may be a true statement of the form ' $\varphi(a)$ ' even if no actual practice exists of using a name which can replace ' a ' to yield a true sentence. Perhaps this notion of a statement might be glossed as an interpreted *possible* sentence, although there may be some difficulty in precisely spelling out the kind of possibility involved; alternatively, one may prefer to talk about language-independent propositions.

1 true statement of the form $\lceil \varphi(a) \rceil$, where ‘ a ’ is schematic for a term denoting
2 some individual.

3 As applied to the event-existential analysis of action sentences, this means that a
4 statement such as (1) above requires for its truth a singular witness; a true statement
5 of the form:

6 (6) $\lceil e$ is an event of Guthrie’s falling over. \rceil

7 or, more generally,

8 (7) $\lceil e$ is a φ -event. \rceil

9 where ‘ e ’ is, again, not a variable but a schematic term going proxy for a *name* for
10 an event.

11 The commitment to singular witnesses for action sentences, as a consequence
12 of the proposal that such sentences quantify over events, is perhaps easy to miss
13 if we attend only to the surface structure of the language of change, since genuine
14 names for events in natural languages are few and far between—with notable excep-
15 tions for especially momentous events, as in ‘Watergate’ or ‘The Great Ordovician
16 Biodiversification Event’—and hence statements with the form of (7) are rarely ac-
17 tually asserted. But if we look at the wider context of our thought and experience of
18 the temporal world, there is nothing revisionary or surprising about it. For, on the
19 picture sketched in §1, the notion of a temporal particular is one that does indeed
20 play a role in our manifest image of the temporal world, and our thinking about
21 our lives extends to the particular episodes they comprise.

22 Now, as noted, (E) is not just the general claim that every existing event is
23 located in the past, like the corresponding claims about dinosaurs and miracles.
24 Rather, it makes a claim about when each individual event comes into existence:
25 namely, at the point of completion. And understanding this claim requires us to
26 descend to the level of the singular witnesses of existential claims. We need to make
27 sense of the claim, *of* an arbitrary event, that while it was occurring it did not exist.

28 Moreover, the need to make sense of such claims of singular nonexistence is
29 required by the dialectical context of the argument from nonexistence. The alleged

1 problem for singular thought about ongoing actions is not that, while the action
2 is ongoing, there are no events, or not enough events, of the relevant kind—the
3 former is generally speaking false, and why should the latter be relevant?—rather,
4 it is that the very event which is the sole candidate target of a *de re* intention, the
5 one which is currently underway, is not yet complete and hence does not exist.
6 Such arguments thereby require us to trace individual events back to that liminal
7 phase of their careers before, as (E) has it, they emerged into reality as full-blown
8 particulars.²⁵ We are, then, already mixed up in the shady business of singular
9 nonexistence claims.

10

11 This is not yet an objection. The disreputability of singular nonexistence claims
12 may not be deserved; indeed the next section will suggest a way of making sense
13 of them, at least in temporal contexts. The present problem is that specifically the
14 Quinean conception cannot be reconciled with the demands made of it by the ar-
15 gument from nonexistence.

16 Singular (non)-existence claims require us to understand ‘exists’ as applying to
17 individuals; on the Quinean conception, it is a quantifier or second-level predicate.
18 We can, however, generate a first-level predicate expressing Quinean existence by
19 using the identity predicate: the open sentence

20 (8) $\exists y(x = y)$

21 says that x is identical with something; that is, there is such a thing as x .²⁶

22 Given classical logic with identity, the resultant property is one which, as a
23 matter of logical necessity, applies always to everything. This notion of singular
24 existence—existing as simply being something—is what Timothy Williamson calls
25 ‘existence in the logical sense.’ As he puts it, ‘Nonexistence in the logical sense is

²⁵McDowell expresses a recognition that there may be a difficulty here when he writes, “things...that do not exist yet are not yet the particulars that, we may awkwardly say, they are going to be.” (ibid., p. 8) The following few paragraphs show how the awkwardness in McDowell’s chosen mode of expression becomes a full-blown contradiction as long as we conceive existence in Quinean terms.

²⁶Alternatively, the idea expressed in (Moore 1936) and (Evans 1982, p. 345) that ‘exists’ expresses a first-level predicate true of everything suggests a partial definition by the axiom: $\forall x \text{Exists}(x)$. Thanks to an editor at this journal for flagging this option.

1 a very radical matter indeed, for it entails having no properties or relations what-
2 soever.’²⁷ This gives a purely formal vindication of the idea that nonexistent entit-
3 ies cannot be thought about—as the contrapositive of the claim that being thought
4 about means being something—and hence promises to validate the argument from
5 nonexistence.

6 However, for the argument to be sound, this logical sense of existence must be
7 one which admits of significant temporal modification. It must be that the domain
8 of what there is, absolutely and unrestrictedly, varies over time. But this is hard to
9 make sense of.

10 Consider some temporarily existing object, *o*. We want to say that, once upon
11 a time, *o* did not exist. This means that, at that time, something, namely *o*, was
12 nothing. And this would seem to be impossible: it is never the case that something
13 is nothing.

14 A natural response here is to say that past (or future) nonexistence is less prob-
15 lematic than present nonexistence, since in denying an object *o*’s existence at a past
16 time, we are presupposing only that *o* exists *now* to satisfy the past-tensed predicate
17 ‘did not exist’. But this simply assumes that the purely logical notion of existence,
18 existing as merely being something, is one that admits of significant tensing: that
19 when we say *o* exists *now* but not *then*, we might mean by this *o*’s existence in the
20 logical sense. And this is precisely the idea whose intelligibility is in question.

21 In order to allow that logical existence might be tensed, we need to make sense
22 not merely of the idea that certain existential claims are now true but were once
23 false. We need, in addition, the temporally *de re* claim that a certain identifiable
24 individual, *o*, once failed to be anything at all. And this requires us both, with
25 respect to a past time, to *identify* an individual, *o*, as the one we are talking about;
26 and nevertheless, with respect to that same past time, to deny that there is anything
27 at all identifiable as that individual.

28 It is tempting to view these difficulties as merely an artefact of the logic of quan-
29 tification: in particular, of the fact that, in classical logic, every instance of ‘ $a = a$ ’
30 is a theorem, and so, by EG, ‘ $\exists xa = x$ ’. It can seem hard to swallow that, for every

²⁷(Williamson 2002, p. 246). Williamson’s line of thought regarding logical existence, which I exploit here, is further developed in his (Williamson 2013).

1 instance of a , it is a logical truth that a exists. So maybe we can find the resources
2 for tensing the logical notion of existence in a free logic.

3 This raises questions of what form the free logic is to take, and how it is inter-
4 preted. In particular, we should ask whether the name position in a true singular
5 negative existential of the form $\ulcorner \sim \exists x(a = x) \urcorner$ is understood as denoting a non-
6 existent object. A purely negative free logic can verify such statements simply by
7 assessing all atomic statements containing empty names as false, and treating the
8 truth-functions classically.²⁸ The natural interpretation of this is that atomic sen-
9 tences with empty names are false, and their negations true, because not about any
10 individual at all.

11 The motivation behind such a negative free logic is, presumably, that we should
12 not have every instance of $\ulcorner a = a \urcorner$, because we cannot assume every term we might
13 substitute for a refers. But the present problem is different. Our problem is to be
14 able consistently to say, with respect to a certain time, *of* a given individual, that it
15 is nothing. Thus we should want to be able to affirm, minimally, the identity of the
16 individual said not to exist at the earlier time with some individual identifiable now:
17 a positive, atomic predication of a nonexistent object. In other words, we need
18 $o = o$, but decline to infer the existential $\exists x o = x$. This requires us to interpret o —
19 and in general the a in any true $\ulcorner \sim \exists x a = x \urcorner$ —not as non-referring, but as referring
20 to a non-existent object.

21 Trying to make sense of what is going on here inevitably ends up betraying the
22 radical nature of logical (non)existence. For instance, it is tempting to model things
23 in terms of a variable domain of individuals: perhaps expressed as a function from
24 times to the set of individuals that exist at each time.²⁹ But this is in effect to ad-
25 opt a tenseless way of conceiving the situation, on which the different time-bound
26 domains are understood as variable restrictions of an absolute, invariant domain,
27 their union. And if such a conception is indeed intelligible, this of course shows
28 that there is an unrestricted, tenseless logical notion of existence underlying the
29 tensed one. We must therefore conclude that the tensed notion of existence is not
30 the radical, unrestricted notion of merely being something, but rather a restriction

²⁸See e.g. Burge's (Burge 1974) free logic for singular terms.

²⁹E.g. (Cocchiarella 1991).

1 on the absolute notion.

2 The most natural way of interpreting such a restriction is epistemic: at any given
3 time, the domain of individuals comprises just those entities which are thinkable at
4 that time. This epistemic interpretation of a tensed notion of existence is coherent
5 and perhaps plausible; but it cannot serve the role required of it in the present
6 dialectic. What is at stake is whether, as per the argument from nonexistence, we
7 have any principled reason for denying that events can be thought about while they
8 are occurring. On the present construal, the claim that events do not exist while
9 they are occurring is now equivalent to just that denial. But some reason needs to
10 be offered for such a claim! If tensed existence is ultimately an epistemic notion,
11 the argument looks flatly premise-circular.

12 One might, on the other hand, reject all models for making sense of variable
13 existence in terms of restrictions on an overarching super-domain.³⁰ But it is doubt-
14 ful whether someone who takes this line can seriously and unqualifiedly allow that
15 there is ever something which was once nothing at all. For such a person has no
16 resources for drawing a distinction between its being true, from the perspective of
17 *now*, that *o* was nothing *then*; and its having been true, from the perspective of *then*,
18 that *o* is nothing.

19 The radical, unrestricted character of the logical sense of existence is exceed-
20 ingly hard to square with its being subject to any form of variation or modification,
21 temporal or otherwise. Williamson (op. cit.) takes such and related considerations
22 to establish that everything does, indeed, exist necessarily and eternally. If that is
23 correct, then of course (E) is false. Or at any rate, the logical sense of existence
24 cannot be the right way of understanding the claim. But in that case we need to
25 know what the alternative notion of existence is, and why something's lacking it at
26 a time should prevent subjects grasping any of the many singular truths that hold
27 of it at that time.

28 Perhaps these considerations are not decisive; there may yet be some way of
29 avoiding the formal problems involved in making sense of an absolute, but tempor-

³⁰Someone who, like (Hornsby 1997), following (McDowell 1994), identifies facts with *thinkables*, is likely to be sympathetic to this thought, and to reject the idea of the domain of thinkable entities as a restriction on what, unrestrictedly, there is.

1 ally variable, logical notion of existence.³¹ But the above discussion indicates that
2 there are serious logico-metaphysical difficulties, of a very general nature, about
3 such an interpretation of the quantifier. As such, it may be uncharitable to read pro-
4 ponents of the argument from nonexistence as committed to such a notion. Rather,
5 we may see them as aiming to articulate an independent, more substantial notion
6 of event-existence, one with the requisite links to singular thought and experience
7 to validate the argument. This is indeed what we find in philosophers such as Mc-
8 Dowell and Thompson, who explain the nonexistence of ongoing events by way
9 of an analogy with the coming-to-be of continuants. In the following sections I
10 consider whether the existence of continuant substances is capable of providing a
11 template for what is needed.

12 **5. Substantial existence**

13 Many substances are perishable. Living things, for instance, are born and die, and
14 we ought to be able to acknowledge that birth and death are a kind of coming-to-be
15 and passing-away. Yet we are also obliged to admit truths about past living things
16 (Frege was celebrated only after his death), and we quantify over past things that
17 were not simultaneously present (there were 13 emperors of the Qing dynasty.)

18 What this seems to suggest is that, at least for continuants, we should acknow-
19 ledge a kind of existence which involves more than merely being a possible value
20 of a bound variable, one which also admits of tense. Call this existence in the *sub-*
21 *stantial sense*. This substantial sense of existence has connotations of certain ways
22 of behaving and concretely being in the world, perhaps specific to that thing's kind.
23 In the case of organisms, it is plausible that existence in the substantial sense is in-
24 timately connected with *being alive*, and with the kinds of living activity connected
25 with that thing's species.³²

³¹One of the best-developed recent attempt is (Correia and Rosenkranz 2018), who in ch. 2 offer some responses to the arguments of Williamson (op. cit.)

³²This may seem to threaten to make 'exists' ambiguous, with two relatively unconnected senses. But they need not be unconnected: for temporal things that enjoy substantial existence, to exist in the logical sense can be identified with existing in the substantial sense at some time or other. A treatment of tensed existence along these lines is given by (Woods 1976). Compare also (Anscombe

1 In the case of continuant substances, it seems plausible to maintain that they
2 are unavailable to thought before they come into substantial existence—before they
3 are born or made—but in principle available thereafter. The conception of exist-
4 ence sketched here affords at least the outline of an explanation of these intuitions.
5 Thinking about an individual requires, at some point, singling it out. More spe-
6 cifically, thinking about an individual requires either singling it out there and then,
7 or being appropriately causally related to a prior act of singling-out, for instance
8 through memory, or through competence with a proper name whose use can be
9 traced back to some initial singling-out. Now, plausibly, something can only be
10 singled out if it is *there*—if it is actually concretely present for the singling-out to
11 take place.³³ This is just to say that entities can only be singled out at a time if they
12 exist in the substantial sense at that time. From this it follows, assuming that causa-
13 tion is unidirectional, that as far as temporal continuant substances are concerned,
14 the only thinkable entities are ones that substantially exist at the present time or
15 prior to the present time.³⁴

16 Thus for continuant substances we have a notion of substantial existence that
17 can play two key theoretical roles. First, it can explain the sense in which substances
18 come to be and pass away, but without making singular nonexistence contradict-
19 ory. The Quinean quantificational conception of existence can still stand, but we
20 now understand it in terms of substantial existence: in our temporal sophistication,
21 we have a grip on the idea of things substantially existing at times other than the
22 present, and can extend our (classical) quantifiers to include those past and future

2015, p. 297), (Geach 1954, pp. 266–268), (Wiggins 2001, p. 69). All the above might be regarded as semantic elaborations of the Aristotelian idea that existence, for substances, is the actuality of a certain kind of *activity*. (cf. *Metaphysics* Θ; for recent expositions see (Beere 2012; Kosman 2013).)

³³This is quite a weak claim. It is much weaker, for instance, than the sortalist thesis that singling out requires having an adequate conception of the singled out thing's kind. However, there is clearly much more that needs to be said about the notion of singling out than I can attempt here.

³⁴This is a rough generalisation. Perhaps there are exceptions: perhaps it is possible to think about an artefact while it is under construction. Or perhaps I can think about my future ham sandwich before the upper piece of bread is in place. But what will still be true is that the possibility of thinking about something before it substantially exists will depend on special considerations about the kinds of processes by which a thing of that kind comes into existence, the ways in which its constituent matter is assembled and transformed, and the ways in which a thinker can be party to those processes. Thus there are still broad temporal constraints on thinkability imposed and explained by the notion of substantial existence.

1 entities.³⁵

2 Secondly, substantial existence has an epistemic and temporal significance,
3 since cognitive access to particulars is enabled by acts of singling out. Access to par-
4 ticulars which are not presently (substantially) existent is hence mediated by causal
5 connections to episodes of contact with them at times at which they were. Because
6 thought about particulars is thereby bound up with the workings of causality, it
7 bears causality's temporal orientation. This introduces a fundamental asymmetry
8 in our access to past and future individuals.

9 The question now is whether this style of explanation might apply to events, in
10 a way that would support (E) in the present context.

11 **6. Being an event**

12 Building on the previous section's sketch account of the existence of continuants in
13 time, (E) might be understood as saying: there is some substantial mode of being
14 for events, importantly analogous to the active being of a continuant substance, as-
15 sociated with *having occurred*. (Perhaps *having occurred* is a determinable, whose
16 many determinates correspond to different kinds of event.) This makes events ana-
17 logous with continuants in the following way: the completion of an event is some-
18 thing analogous to the birth or creation of a continuant; the period leading up to
19 the completion of the event is analogous to the process of gestation, assembly, or
20 whatever, which leads up to the creation of a new continuant. Moreover, for events,
21 *having occurred* places constraints on cognitive access similar to those that, for in-
22 stance, *living* places for biological continuants.³⁶

23 An essential aspect of the picture just sketched for continuants is that we un-
24 derstand the mere logical existence of a continuant in terms of its past or future
25 substantial existence. The substantial sense of 'exists' is its *focal* sense, underlying
26 the thinner, logical one. Napoleon's logical existence as a subject of predication or
27 possible value of a variable is not a matter of a kind of logical shadow obtruding into

³⁵I leave it open whether an analogous account can be given of the priority of actual over merely possible existence.

³⁶Cf. Thompson, *op. cit.*, pp. 134–137; McDowell, *op. cit.*, pp. 8–9.

1 the present; rather it consists in the fact that he *once* existed as a flesh-and-blood
2 human, although he no longer does.

3 This is connected with a more general point about our concept of the past. In
4 thinking about things past, we have a sense of something somehow actual, but nev-
5 ertheless absent from the world as we now experience it. Central to this conception
6 is our appreciation that the past comprises the same kinds of things, broadly speak-
7 ing, that we can experience now; and the very same things, strictly speaking, that
8 were once available to be experienced. The primacy, in temporal contexts, of the
9 substantial sense of existence, is a consequence of this conception. It is because
10 we can temporally ‘decentre’, and understand the idea of there being, say, a living
11 human being at a time now past, that we can understand the idea of a merely past
12 human.³⁷ It is only thanks to our grip on the idea of past presence that we can
13 understand the idea of present pastness.

14 But the idea that *having occurred* could supply a focal sense of existence for
15 events destroys this conception of the past. It requires that we think of the past
16 as comprising entities of a *sui generis* kind, categorially different from anything to
17 be encountered in the present. Not only are these entities unencounterable, but we
18 cannot understand what it would be for such a thing to be present to us: their being
19 consists precisely in their absence. If this is what events are, we begin to lose our
20 grip on their reality. The domain of past events becomes a mythical realm, removed
21 from any conception of actuality we can form.

22 The suggested analogy between the progress of an event and the coming-to-be
23 of a substance is in this respect profoundly misguided. When a substance comes
24 into being, we can distinguish process and product: the formation process, and the
25 new individual that results. The possibility of the distinction rests on the fact that,
26 once a substance is created, it is *there* to be met with, part of the present fabric of
27 the world; we thereby separate it from the goings-on, now over, that led up to its
28 existence.

29 But attempting to resolve non-substantial changes, like my crossing the street,
30 into process and product, is hopeless. What is the thing produced when, say, I cross

³⁷The notion of temporal decentring is coined by (Cromer 1971). For discussion see the contri-
butions to (Hoerl and McCormack 2001).

1 the street? Just: the event of my having crossed the street. But if this is distinct
2 from the process by which it came to be—from what was actually going on while I
3 was crossing the street—we are left utterly in the dark about what the event, as so
4 distinguished, might be.³⁸

5 Denying the existence of ongoing events opens up an ontological rift between
6 the past and the present, and thereby renders their connection unfathomable. If
7 the past comprises its own, proprietary kind of entity, necessarily foreign to the
8 present, we can no longer regard the past and the present as of a piece, the past
9 having once been present and the present soon to be past. We surrender our grip
10 on a unified temporal reality, of which past and present are complementary faces,
11 and are set adrift in time, stuck in an unmoored, free-floating present.

12 7. Events deflated?

13 The previous section pressed the requirement that our understanding of what it is
14 for something to exist as past must in some way be grounded in an understanding
15 of what it is for such a thing to have once been present. But the defender of (E)
16 may reject this requirement as spurious. They may reply that here the analogy
17 with continuants is misleading: although our understanding of the past existence
18 of continuants is grounded in our understanding of their present existence, this is
19 not how it is with events.

20 How, then, is the idea of an event's past existence to be elucidated? The answer
21 offered may be: our understanding of the existence of events constitutes no more
22 than what is manifested in our competence with past-tensed aspectual verb forms,
23 specifically with the alternation of imperfective 'A was φ -ing' and perfective 'A φ -ed'.
24 Sebastian Rödl writes,

³⁸This point is appreciated by O'Shaughnessy: "...the on-going of a process is not a *distinct phenomenon* from the happening of the event it constitutively realises. How can the constituting of *an event*, as opposed to a *material object*, be distinct from the occurrence of the event? The object moves off into other times, and perhaps other places, and in this sense *transcends* its spatio-temporal beginnings, but the event does not...[an event] cannot cut itself adrift in the manner of an object" (O'Shaughnessy 1971, p. 222) Puzzlingly, O'Shaughnessy nevertheless insists that the process which he calls the 'constituting' of the event is somehow distinct from the event itself.

1 ...a thought refers...to a concept with an argument place for events if and only if
2 it predicates...a movement form. We grasp the contrast of event and event-concept
3 through the contrast of movement and movement form, which contrast is grounded
4 in the contrast of aspect. (2012, p. 164)

5 The key idea of this passage is that the category of event, or temporally extended
6 occurrence, is to be explained via the contrast of imperfective and perfective aspect
7 that aspectual verb-forms ('movement forms') admit.³⁹ Accordingly, one might
8 extract from these remarks the suggestion that we can understand the idea of a
9 particular event of, say, my crossing the street, existing in the past just in terms
10 of the truth of the pair of statements 'I was crossing the street' and 'I crossed the
11 street'.

12 This response embodies a certain deflationary attitude to the category of event.
13 We understand the past existence of an event in terms of the truth of aspectual past-
14 tensed statements, rather than vice versa. Thus the demand for any further account
15 of what it is for an event to exist in the past is rejected.⁴⁰

16 The position staked out by such a response is, I think, at least coherent. The
17 question is whether it really amounts to a full-blooded acceptance of the category
18 of event. The deflationist's suggestion is that statements about events be understood
19 ultimately in terms of aspectual verb forms predicated of continuants. This recalls
20 A. N. Prior's insistence that 'what looks like talk about events is really at bottom
21 talk about things' (Prior 2003, p. 16).

22 It is hard to see how such an attitude is to be reconciled with a conception of
23 events as concrete particulars. If Rödl is correct to insist that we only grasp the
24 notion of an event through our comprehension of aspectual verbs, then perhaps so
25 much the worse for the conception of events as concrete particulars. But there is
26 reason to think this cannot be the whole story.

27 Davidson's crucial observation was that ordinary past perfective statements
28 only tell us that a certain kind of event occurred at least once. The missing 'How-

³⁹Cf. also Thompson, pp. 21–22. A formal elaboration of this idea in the setting of a tense logic in the style of A. N. Prior is to be found in (Galton 1984). Both Thompson and Rödl draw heavily, albeit critically, on Galton's 'event-logic' in developing their accounts of event-forms.

⁴⁰The deflationary move I am extracting from Rödl's remarks has a certain amount in common with the 'easy ontology' developed recently by (Thomasson 2015). This is an alliance I suspect both authors would find surprising.

1 many?’ information can of course be supplied by adverbial modifiers. But any
2 count-modification still produces only statements that have the form of generalisa-
3 tions, rather than speaking of particular events. Meanwhile, I have been pressing
4 the requirement of (\exists -Witness) that any genuine generalisation, if true, must have
5 a true singular witness. The question is whether the deflationist is able to provide
6 any coherent account of what such a singular witness might be.

7 It is of course possible to use devices of nominalisation to formulate what look
8 like singular witnesses: ‘My crossing of the street began at 4pm’, etc. With suffi-
9 cient (explicit or implicit) restrictions in place, such nominalisations may succeed
10 in picking out, by description, particular events. But the question is whether the
11 deflationist may understand nominalisations in this way, as singular witnesses for
12 quantified statements. For the deflationist, nominalisations can always be para-
13 phrased back into modified verbal form—‘I crossed the street exactly once between
14 4pm and 4.01pm’. But if the nominalised sentences are so paraphrasable, then we
15 would not after all have moved beyond the generality of the ordinary past perfective
16 to the layer of singular truth below.

17 Here is another way of putting the point. On a Russellian analysis, statements
18 containing definite descriptions are existential rather than singular in form. Such
19 statements thus do not constitute the singular witnesses required by \exists -Witness.
20 Rather, their truth implies such witnesses exist. And if the deflationist’s nomin-
21 alisations are just paraphrases of modified verbal forms (perhaps involving some
22 contextually determined restriction of the domain), this is effectively to say that
23 their underlying form is existential, like a Russellian descriptive statement. But in
24 that case, the intelligibility of such nominalisations does not show that we have any
25 grip on what a singular witness for a past perfective statement would be.

26 By contrast, someone with a conception of events as concrete particulars might
27 regard verb nominalisations as, at least sometimes, containing a deictic component:
28 a contextually determined reference to a particular event of the relevant kind.⁴¹ In
29 fully explaining the meaning of such a statement, one would need to oneself point
30 in thought to the event demonstrated via the nominalisation. Such an element

⁴¹A more radical view is that ordinary tensed statements already involve deictic reference to actual events. Cf. (Kamp and Reyle 1993; Partee 1973).

1 of deixis takes us beyond the merely general form of the ordinary verbal statement.
2 Thus, someone who adopts this strategy will be exploiting a conception of what it is
3 for an event to exist that goes beyond what can be expressed by means of aspectual
4 verbs, and hence is unavailable to the deflationist.

5 There is perhaps a latent Quineanism in Rödl's deflationary move. It embodies
6 the idea that commitment to an ontology of events is expressed just in the quanti-
7 ficational, or quasi-quantificational, structure of our linguistically mediated ways
8 of representing change and motion. What I am fundamentally urging is that this
9 attitude does not embody an adequate recognition of events as *particulars*. Rather,
10 attending to the dimension of particularity in our understanding of time should
11 lead us to acknowledge an area of our thinking which is closely related to, but is
12 not fully explicable in terms of, our ways of representing change in general.

13 **8. Concluding remarks**

14 (E) is, in effect, the denial that events have, while they are occurring, something
15 which they may be said later to enjoy. As I have argued, it is wholly mysterious what
16 that something might be. If we mean merely being a possible subject of predication,
17 then there are serious obstacles to making sense of this being temporally variable
18 in a way that does not degenerate into a merely epistemic restriction. If, on the
19 other hand, we have in mind something more robust, analogous to the existence
20 of a continuant, we then seem to be committed to separating the existence of an
21 event from what was actually going on while it was occurring.

22 The fundamental mistake here is to want a notion of existence at a time
23 for events that works in roughly the same way as the existence of a continuant.
24 Someone in the grip of this desire, yet impressed by the thought that events, unlike
25 continuants, are in some sense not 'all there' at any one time, may well recoil from
26 saying that events exist at any time while they are occurring. It is then tempting
27 to picture the event as gradually accumulating, finally coming into existence at the
28 point of completion, like the last bricks of a house being laid. But this is a fantasy;
29 as I have argued, we are left with no real idea of what the event, as finished product,

1 might be.

2 What the deflationary move just discussed gets right is the recognition that it
3 is a mistake to look for such a notion of existence at a time. But, as I argued there,
4 it is equally mistaken to insist that the notion of a particular event cannot take us
5 beyond what is expressible in the language of things changing and having changed.
6 The correct thing to say is, rather, that events *occur*; and occurrence is something
7 that happens over time. The basic notion is accordingly not that of existence at
8 a time, but occurrence over an interval. We can, if we want, decide to say that an
9 event exists at t just in case it occurs over an interval that contains t —or even, as per
10 (E), that an event exists at t just in case it occurs over an interval prior to t . Alternat-
11 ively, it may be preferable to reserve the term ‘existence’, when speaking of events,
12 to the bare, tenesless, logical notion, and hence to say that an event exists just in
13 case it occurs over some interval or other. But we must remember that any such
14 notions are artificial, and derivative of the more fundamental one of occurrence
15 over an interval.

16 Keeping in mind that events, fundamentally, occur over intervals of time,
17 many interesting questions arise regarding the temporal conditions of experien-
18 cing, singling out, and thinking about particular events. I have urged caution in
19 the assessment of arguments from interruption; but I have by no means ruled out
20 other routes to the conclusion that events cannot be singled out while they occur.

21 A different idea, not explicitly raised by McDowell or others, is that there may
22 be something about standing to a particular action as agent that prevents one from
23 singling it out as a particular while one is so acting. There is, so one might argue,
24 something inherently general about practical thought: it involves thinking about
25 one’s agency—indeed one’s whole life—as an open-ended, developing project of
26 realising one’s ends and values. In contrast, thinking about one’s particular actions,
27 the actual worldly events in which such ideals are more or less perfectly realised,
28 typifies a mode of thinking about one’s life that is not practical but rather reflective
29 and evaluative—and, indeed, is typically retrospective.

30 Raising this possibility allows us to underline a more general point. There are
31 undoubtedly deep differences in how we relate to events in the past, present and

1 future; and there may be special differences in the case of our own actions. The
2 fundamental mistake involved in a claim like (E) is to understand such perspectival
3 differences in ontological terms. Doing so makes the past into a disconnected and
4 autonomous realm, and renders our belief in it ultimately mythical. Rather, the
5 complexities of how we relate to the events that make up our lives can only properly
6 be got into view once we have discarded the incoherent idea of a thing of the past.⁴²

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