

UNITED WISDOM

The Present: A Point, a Duration, or a Relation?

World and Consciousness

Andrey Zarinsh & Maria Evilkut

W-12-N01 · EN

@andrey.zarinsh @ilkutki

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Epigraph

> *the 'now' is a boundary*

Aristotle, Physics, IV, Part 11, R. P. Hardie and R. K. Gaye's English translation. A complete clause from a sentence considering the now specifically as a boundary. The neighbouring argument also treats it as connecting time; the quotation does not cancel that distinction.

What this article is about

When we say now, we may mean a clock instant, an ongoing conversation, or our current circumstances. One word serves different questions. Advice to live in the present can consequently sound clearer than it is: the present's scale, content, and relation to earlier commitments remain unspecified. This article considers three approaches: Aristotle's now as a boundary, James's perceived present as duration, and Einstein's definition of simultaneity in physical systems. Their comparisons include useful connections and real disagreements. They cannot become proof of a single correct way to live. For UW, the practical question is which relation to an event we describe as present, and what grounds that description. Clarification supports discussion of current action without making the past a useless burden, the future a forbidden subject, or another person's time an extension of our own feeling.

I. One word, several scales

Imagine a conversation in which someone asks what is happening now and receives three accurate answers: a clock hand is passing a mark, a discussion about moving house is underway, and a family is living through an uncertain month. The answers concern different scales. A mark does not contain a month; a month is not one physical instant; the conversation cannot be fully described by its starting coordinate. We need not select one answer in advance. We must identify the question's subject. Transport arrival calls for a shared clock reading. An unfinished request needs the speaker's words. Family circumstances require a history of conditions and decisions.

Right now sometimes intensifies a sense of precision without supplying a definition. One participant means an immediate answer, another a decision during the day, and a third hears a demand to suspend other obligations. Disagreement can be mistaken for unwillingness to cooperate when even the interval remains unsettled. An intensifier can be replaced with a

@andrey.zarinsh @ilkutki

concrete question: when is an answer needed, what happens before then, and is a pause possible? This does not impoverish conversation. It connects a request with its conditions and avoids attributing refusal before we understand what someone was asked to do.

Another confusion is an unnoticed shift from description to demand. Being engaged in a current activity does not require forgetting tomorrow's meeting. Difficulty describing the present as a point does not make schedules meaningless. The past's completion does not erase an earlier decision's consequences. These transitions need separate arguments; the word present cannot do their work. A discussion of living in the present should name the possibility it seeks to open and the action it regards as appropriate, rather than presenting a preference as a conclusion about time's nature.

Within Path, the question's scale matters. We can discuss a current life stage without asserting that it is perceived whole in one act. We can identify the next available action without declaring it free of history. The scale follows a task: understanding a conversation, fulfilling a promise, or changing work conditions. New information may change it during discussion. Naming that change avoids silently extending a conclusion about a short episode to an entire period. Such precision leaves room for experience and for what is not immediately given but still affects the decision.

II. Aristotle's boundary

In Physics IV, Parts 10–11, Aristotle examines difficulties concerning time and the now's relation to before and after. The now is not treated as a part from which time is assembled by addition; it is connected with boundary and continuity. This is philosophical inquiry into motion and counting, rather than an attention exercise. The translation is by R. P. Hardie and R. K. Gaye; the page does not establish a particular print exemplar or date. Parts 10–12 were read completely, while Part 13 was read only up to the page's break. Its unavailable continuation is not credited to that reading.

A boundary can be considered without turning the image into an everyday law. A boundary between two stretches need not be a third stretch of equal size. In an original illustration, the end of a conversation separates before from after, without stating how long it lasted. Other information is needed. Likewise, what counts as now differs from the number of minutes. The illustration clarifies a distinction without replacing Aristotle's argument. A modern use should not present a convenient example as proof of the ancient theory or its literal continuation.

Boundaries can also distinguish without removing connection. An agreement to end a conversation does not make its words cease to have consequences. A proposal may need a later answer, a promise may need fulfilment, or a misunderstood question may need clarification. Before and after help retain those relations. Treating a meeting's end as erasure

converts the boundary into an arbitrary release from obligations. No such release follows from defining a moment. It needs a separate discussion with affected people and consideration of the grounds of the earlier promise.

Difficulty arises when life is imagined as a collection of pure beginnings. Each new now supposedly has no connection with its predecessor, allowing a previous decision to be declared alien. That attractive picture is not supplied by Aristotle's selected distinction. Continuity itself resists reducing the matter to separate points. A practical conclusion can be more cautious: distinguish the current moment from the past while retaining a relation to it. Which relations to retain or revise is settled by examining commitments, changes, and participants' agreement, rather than by the word boundary.

III. James's duration

In The Principles of Psychology, Chapter XV, pp.605–610, James describes the perceived present as possessing some breadth. What has just passed participates in experienced succession. James's prose differs from the neighbouring E. R. Clay quotation, to which he attributes the specious-present term. This is historical analysis of perception, not a universally established neural mechanism. No standard size of the present in seconds is taken from this passage. It opens a question about connected experience without settling that question through a current quantitative model.

Suppose someone hears a short instruction: open the document, check its date, and then answer the sender. Understanding the third action involves relating it to the preceding words. The conversation's present has content extending beyond the last syllable. This does not mean the entire instruction was understood correctly. A condition may have been missed or the order confused, requiring repetition or a written record. Connected experience and accurate understanding are different questions. The first describes what was experienced; the second needs checking against the task and perhaps clarification from the other participant.

Experiencing a connected instruction does not establish that an entire day, year, or life is held at once. A larger scale generally requires information, memories, and descriptions to be gathered. Calling a current life stage present is ordinary usage, but does not make it a single immediate perception. Discussing the stage therefore benefits from asking what grounds the account: which events are confirmed, what is remembered, and what participants expect. This permits an integrated understanding while distinguishing the resulting account from the particular episode that prompted it, leaving room for correction.

The distinction supports moderation in reflection. Understanding one current action does not require trying to experience a whole life at once. A completed request and answer, a short work sequence, or a meeting's beginning can be examined. That fragment cannot become a

final portrait of a person. An unsuccessful reply does not establish a life's direction, and a satisfying sense of connection does not guarantee a sound decision. The question is whether the chosen episode supports the intended conclusion. If it does not, suitable information should widen the inquiry without being presented as enlarging the perceived present itself.

IV. Einstein's relation between events

In §1 of Einstein's 1905 paper, distant clock readings need a coordination rule. The definition of simultaneity connects events with clocks in the selected system. Section 2 considers simultaneity across relatively moving systems. This is a physical question with stated assumptions. It differs from saying that each person has an experienced present. A reference system is not character, attention, or mood. Occurring simultaneously and being experienced together require different grounds; similar language does not make one evidence for the other.

Two people calling from different places agree on a starting time. That agreement does not establish that they experience the conversation as the same process. One awaits a decision while the other is still clarifying the question. Their schedules can coincide while their understanding differs. Conversely, people may feel part of one project while acting at different intervals. These examples concern human coordination and demonstrate no relativistic effect. Both tasks remain: agreeing on a time and clarifying the meaning of the shared activity.

The physical setup also does not justify declaring absent every present outside immediate experience. That would be a metaphysical conclusion about existence, unsupported by the selected §§1–2. They are used here only to distinguish local readings, distant-event coordination, and comparisons between systems. This article does not cover the full philosophical dispute about the existence of past and future, or present the selected definition as its solution. A precise limit can seem less striking than a grand formula about the world. It makes the source's actual support checkable while leaving unanswered questions open.

In practical discussion, clarifying our relation to an event is often more useful. Has it happened, is it ongoing, or has it merely been agreed? When is an answer expected? Which actions depend on each other? These questions need no transfer of physical theory into psychology. They prevent a simple error: treating a future meeting as accomplished because anticipation already occupies attention. Anticipation is current experience; the meeting remains a future event. This distinction matters for promises, travel, and another person's right to change their decision. A vivid thought confirms neither an event's occurrence nor someone else's agreement.

V. Similarity does not remove disagreement

Aristotle and James consider the now and the present within different projects. A boundary in temporal order is not automatically psychological duration. Perceived breadth does not remove the possibility of marking an event's boundary either. Their different answers make juxtaposition useful. We can ask how a meeting's end is defined and how a participant understands its final sentence. These are two questions, rather than competing measurements. A reader need not accept an author's entire philosophy to recognize a distinction. In that case, the contemporary use must be explicitly limited instead of silently inheriting every philosophical commitment.

A genuine disagreement also resists being smoothed away in an attractive comparison. In Physics IV, Part 12, Aristotle speaks of time as the same everywhere in his discussion. Einstein's selected passage requires distinguishing simultaneity for relatively moving systems. These cannot simply be presented as identical ideas without additional transformations. The historical difference must remain visible. This does not make Aristotle unreadable. It prevents his inquiry from becoming a ready-made description of a modern physical situation or supporting relativity merely because both texts mention motion.

James's account likewise should not become an argument that clocks measure only illusion. His analysis concerns how succession is perceived; clocks retain their defined subject in coordinating action. What participants understood within an interval can be discussed without cancelling it. A time record can be checked without declaring experience invented. This coexistence of questions is more modest than a unified theory of consciousness and the world. It allows different information to be used and independently examined, without assigning one level exclusive authority over all others in advance.

The comparison's boundary matters particularly for practical slogans. A statement about the present may invite attention, but these sources support no universal duty to avoid thinking about past or future. Readers can accept, clarify, or decline that invitation. Preparing for tomorrow does not mean being absent from life today. Returning to an unfulfilled promise need not obstruct current action. The issue is reflection's content and relation to action, rather than prohibition of an entire temporal direction. A philosophical distinction should open questions instead of providing a ready-made command.

VI. A current action has a history

Consider someone answering a request received a week earlier. Writing happens during a current interval. The answer's grounds concern an earlier agreement; its possible outcome lies ahead. These relations coexist without requiring a single time to be selected. An appropriate answer needs the request's content, deadline, and changed circumstances. Concentrating on typing words is insufficient. The current activity includes consulting necessary information, even though acquiring that information does not happen again at the moment of writing.

If the earlier agreement has become impossible to fulfil, a reasonable current action may be to communicate the changed conditions. This differs from an inward decision that the promise is obsolete. Someone else may have relied on it and remain unaware of the obstacle. Discussion guarantees neither agreement nor freedom from consequences. It preserves the difference between a real constraint and presumed permission to remain silent. Attention to the present includes recognizing an active relation with another person. It does not stop at experiencing one's own instant or turn convenient psychological language into grounds for unilaterally cancelling shared conditions.

The reverse difficulty is repeating an earlier decision after its grounds have changed. Connection with history need not require mechanical continuation. We can name what is no longer true, which consequences remain, and who needs a new conversation. Revision does not erase history. It makes change visible and separates a previous intention from current capacity. This practical inquiry is a UW proposal, neither proved by Aristotle's continuity nor supplied as James's method. The comparison helps articulate a distinction; the decision is assessed against the particular situation's conditions.

Current action can therefore be understood as active participation in relations without becoming a special physical entity. A person reads information, clarifies a request, answers, acknowledges unavailability, or proposes another deadline. Choice depends on what happened and what is expected. An absence of available action can be named. Autonomy needs no picture of an instant's unlimited freedom. It can involve precise recognition of limits, asking for support, and declining to give a new promise unsupported by conditions. Neither an impression's intensity nor a quantity of minutes replaces these distinctions.

VII. The future is present as a relation

Tomorrow's agreed meeting exists today as an agreement and an expectation. The event has not occurred. This distinction permits discussion of plans without magically turning thought into fact. Someone may currently prepare materials, check travel, or confirm participation. These actions are real within their intervals; none proves that the meeting will happen. Changed conditions require an updated agreement. Uncertainty does not devalue preparation. It prevents preparedness from becoming a guarantee, or another person from being treated as bound merely because we have already imagined the forthcoming conversation.

Sometimes living only in the present is invoked to reject preparation. Absence of a guarantee does not make planning meaningless. Preparation may be needed precisely because future conditions are not immediately available. The opposite extreme justifies every current minute only through a future outcome, potentially obscuring the meeting, rest, or work itself. There is no universal ratio between these extremes. A person decides how much preparation a particular activity needs and what place the activity itself has. These sources set no common norm for a conversation with someone close, contracted work, and a freely chosen walk.

It helps to identify the existing relation to the future: intention, promise, assumption, or agreed action. Each needs different information. A personal intention may not yet involve anyone else; a promise requires another person's expectations to be considered. An assumption needs checking; an agreed action needs conditions and communication if they change. This does not forbid imagination. It preserves its status rather than silently converting it into a shared fact. Within Path, the distinction supports choosing a next step suited to current capacity, without demanding that an entire future life be settled in one act.

If money, work arrangements, another person's agreement, or assistance make a step unavailable, a philosophy of the present should not turn the limitation into personal guilt. Conditions can be examined for possible change. An intention can stay open or be abandoned if that is the person's decision. Correctly experiencing an instant cannot be promised to remove the obstacle. Temporal clarification helps through sobriety: thinking something possible differs from a confirmed possibility. This limit preserves dignity without imaginary omnipotence and allows the part of the situation needing external change to be named.

VIII. A shared present needs no identical experience

Two participants can attend a meeting simultaneously and understand what is happening differently. One believes a decision has been made; the other believes options remain under discussion. For the first, the task is now being implemented; for the second, choice continues. This is a question of meaning and agreement rather than a physical paradox. A schedule entry cannot settle it. Direct questions are needed: what was agreed, which options remain open, and who must respond? Until clarified, a formula about a shared moment can conceal a difference that later becomes a dispute about an unfulfilled promise.

A shared present also gives no participant authority to define another's experience. A meeting may seem complete, while someone reports an unanswered question. That report deserves consideration without obliging others to prolong conversation indefinitely. They can agree to continue, answer briefly, name unavailability, or decline. Respect involves a clear response and recognized limits. It requires no identical sense of duration or importance. Such a demand would be a new relational norm unsupported by James's connected experience or Einstein's clock-coordination procedure.

A request to be here needs clarification. It might mean turning off notifications during a conversation, helping with a specified task, or agreeing on the next contact. A concrete form lets another person assess availability and answer. A general request may work between people who know each other, but disagreement calls for explanation. A single score for felt presence is unnecessary. We can identify an observable action and ask whether it meets the stated need. This promises no complete understanding, but makes the question answerable and available for a limited change.

The present of a relationship thus concerns the current status of interaction as well as inner content. Relation means identifiable connections: who participates, what has been said or confirmed, and what is expected. It is no fourth physical dimension or hidden structure of the world. Modesty leaves practical work possible. An unknown status can be clarified. Missing agreement cannot be replaced by a feeling of closeness. Unavailable participation can be acknowledged. These facts make coordination more precise even while the participants' experienced presents differ and never form a single inner picture.

IX. Choosing a question about the present

Before reflecting, identify the question's kind. Do we want a temporal mark, an understanding of perceived succession, or the current relation to an event? The first requires an agreed temporal reference. The second needs an experiential account with acknowledged limits. The third calls for information about events, agreements, and available actions. One situation may contain all three; their answers should not be mixed. A precise mark confirms no understanding. An intense experience establishes no agreement. A prospective action does not become accomplished because its content is already clear.

The inquiry can be brief. Someone notices they are saying everything is settled after receiving only a personal impression from a conversation, and checks whether agreement was confirmed. Or they recognize that an entire life stage is being assessed from one difficult evening and gather other information. Or they clarify an answer's deadline instead of demanding someone's immediate presence. Each step addresses a particular confusion. No continuous monitoring of consciousness is needed. The inquiry belongs where present-related language obscures a task, rather than as a compulsory way to live each minute.

The outcome can also be no new action. A status may already be clear, a request agreed, and conditions suitable. Change may be impossible, or available information may not settle the question. Uncertainty can be named without manufacturing a conclusion to finish the exercise. Philosophical reading need not immediately produce a deed; it may clarify a distinction useful later. A person retains the right to decide how much space the inquiry receives, without proving depth through constant attention to their present or conformity with a prescribed image of inward composure.

A point, a duration, and a relation remain different ways to formulate a question. Aristotle examines boundary and connections between before and after; James, perceived succession; Einstein, the conditions defining simultaneity. Their disagreements show which transitions cannot happen silently. Contemporary UW application concerns clarifying current action and its grounds. The present need not become thought's only permitted territory. It can be where someone consults history, prepares for the future, considers another person, and decides what is actually available now, preserving the distinction between that decision and a theory of time.

What this means in practice

Choose a present-related phrase that has caused difficulty: an answer is needed now, everything is decided, or I want to be here. Do not use someone else's words to secretly interpret their motives. Name your own question and consider whether a procedure is needed. This is a UW proposal for clarifying discussion, rather than an exercise with demonstrated psychological efficacy.

Establish what now means: an exact moment, an allowable interval, an experienced episode, or an agreement's current status. If it concerns another person's request, ask them. Separate available information from your impression. Retain the possibility of mistaken judgments about succession or meaning; clarification need not confirm the original account.

Check relations to past and future. What happened, which promise remains active, what is merely assumed, and what is agreed? Do not erase an obligation through a new feeling. If conditions changed, decide who needs to know and which response is available. A constraint does not itself establish another person's agreement to postponement or refusal.

If a step is needed, choose one: name an answer's deadline, clarify a decision, prepare information, or acknowledge unavailability. An entire life's direction need not be encompassed. After clarification, stop. The purpose is to distinguish a question and its grounds, rather than achieve permanent ideal presence. The number of inquiries measures neither freedom nor maturity nor the rightness of a life.

Key quotation

> *the practically cognized present is no knife-edge, but a saddle-back*

William James, The Principles of Psychology, XV, pp.609–610, original English, 1890. A complete grammatical clause from a longer sentence explaining the present's breadth. It is James's own prose, not the neighbouring Clay quotation. The image concerns perception and does not define physical simultaneity.

Connections between traditions

Texts and locators	Mechanism of comparison	Difference
Aristotle, IV.11, boundary of now; James, XV, pp.608–610, present with duration	Separate an ordering boundary from an experienced episode's content.	Aristotle's boundary is not psychological breadth; the doctrines are not identified.
Aristotle, IV.11, before/after; Einstein, §1, clocks A/B	Clarify how a temporal relation is established.	Counting motion philosophically and synchronizing clocks physically have different grounds.
Aristotle, IV.12, time everywhere; Einstein, §2, relatively moving systems	Preserve historical disagreement instead of replacing it with a slogan.	These positions are not presented as one physical theory.
James, XV, pp.605–607, connected succession; Einstein, §1, distant events	Ask what relates events within the description.	An experienced connection does not replace a definition of simultaneity.
Aristotle, IV.13, available opening on extended now; James, XV, p.611, symbolically conceived intervals	Notice changes in the scale of now.	An ordinary extended interval is not one immediately perceived whole; unavailable IV.13 continuation is not used.
Aristotle, IV.11, boundary and continuity; James, XV, pp.609–610, connected experience	Distinguish a current action from its history while retaining a relation.	Checking a promise is an original UW practice, not a historical method or tested intervention.

Primary sources

1. Aristotle, Physics, Book IV, R. P. Hardie and R. K. Gaye English translation. Parts 10–12 and the available opening of Part 13: time's difficulties, now, counting, and continuity. Print exemplar and date are unestablished; the page breaks in Part 13. The ancient argument is not adopted as a modern physical model.

2. William James, The Principles of Psychology, XV, original English, 1890; Christopher D. Green transcription, York University. Pages 605–610 and the opening of p.611: perceived present and succession. No current universal duration of perception is established.

3. Albert Einstein, On the Electrodynamics of Moving Bodies, 1905; W. Perrett and G. B. Jeffery translation, The Principle of Relativity, Methuen, 1923; John Walker electronic edition.

Introduction and §§1–2, pp.1–5: simultaneity and reference systems. The full metaphysical dispute about past and future existence is outside this article.

Tags

present, now, time, boundary, duration, relation, Aristotle, Physics, William James, Einstein, perception, succession, simultaneity, synchronization, reference system, continuity, before and after, philosophy of time, historical psychology, Path, current action, promise, agreement, preparation, expectation, temporal scale, shared action, grounds of decision

About the authors

Andrey Zarinsh is the author and founder of United Wisdom. He explores inner transformation, the unity of traditions, intercultural dialogue, and contemporary spiritual discipline. Instagram: @andrey.zarinsh.

Maria Evilkut is a co-author of United Wisdom. Alongside her research, she seeks to test these ideas in practice and observe how principles of unity and mutual understanding work in real life between people and cultures. Instagram: @ilkutki.