

Temporal Experience and the Attitudes

Antony Eagle

University of Adelaide
<antony.eagle@adelaide.edu.au>

Metaphysics » Lecture 4

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Temporal Experience

The Role of Experience

- › Reality presents itself to us, in experience, as temporally rich:

As we encounter it in experience ... time is intrinsically directed and in continuous flux. There are differences between past and future in how much we know about them, in whether we can affect them, and other ways that have come under examination.... The past seems fixed, but there is a sense of openness about the future. Change and movement are the rule rather than the exception. We are almost irresistibly inclined to describe time in dynamical terms. We say that one event gives rise to the next, that time passes or flows, that we cannot stop the fleeting moment from being incorporated irretrievably into the past. (Ismael 2011: 460)

(Anti-)Reductionism

- › Call the properties of absolute presentness, dynamic passage, irreducible tense, etc., **A-properties** (recall Markosian 1993: 832).
- › For Paul, **reductionism** grants that while we have experiences *as of* the temporal A-properties of nowness and passage, those experiences are in some sense misleading: ‘there are no properties of nowness or passage’ (Paul 2010: 338).
 - › Thus, the reductionist is a B-theorist, and her anti-reductionist opponent is an A-theorist.
 - › Paul is denying that there are A-properties, but she’s not saying that B-theorists have to give up the indexical *now*, for example.
- › The question is: can the B-theorist/reductionist **explain** why we seem to experience passage, etc., if there is no such thing? If not, then we have reason to favour the A-theory.
- › Indeed, it looks like we have an **argument** for the A-theory that needs to be examined.

The Argument for the A-theory from Temporal Experience

- (1) We have experiences as of the [absolute] nowness of events.
- (2) We have experiences as of passage (and as of change).
- (3) The thesis that there are temporal properties of nowness and passage provides the only reasonable explanation of why we have these experiences.
- (4) The thesis that there are temporal properties of nowness and passage provides the best explanation of why we have these experiences.
- (5) Hence, there are temporal properties of nowness and passage.
(Paul 2010: 338-39)

Paul's strategy

I will argue against (3) by providing an account of how temporal experience could arise from the way the brains of conscious beings experience and interpret cognitive inputs from series of static events. Once we have such an account, a reductionist ontology in conjunction with empirical results from cognitive science can be used to provide a reasonable explanation of how we have experiences as of nowness, passage, and change. The result, I hope, will be to change the dialectic by shifting the burden of proof. (Paul 2010: 339)

- › If this strategy succeeds, a major **obstacle** to the acceptance of the reductionist B-theory is removed. Positive support for the A-theory will have to be found elsewhere. (It's not clear where.)
 - › Paul is not aiming to **rebut** anti-reductionism (Baron, Cusbert, *et al.* 2015: 565); but they will be sceptical that there is any good source of evidence for the theory if temporal experience is not a good source.

A-Theory and Experience

- › Perception presents us with experiences **as of** passage, experiences which seem to have the A-theorist's absolute presentness as a constituent.
- › The argument for the A-theory **above** takes our temporal experience to be **translucent**: revealing temporal reality as involving genuine properties of passage, (absolute) presentness, etc. Experience is not misleading; things are as they **seem** in temporal experience.
- › The challenge for B-theories is: how to make sense of this, if (in physical reality) time is merely a dimension, and tense an indexical phenomenon?
- › Two B-theory strategies present themselves (Baron, Cusbert, *et al.* 2015: 562; Deng 2017):
 - Illusionism** Temporal experience does have absolute presentness and passage in its content, so our experience is illusory, because there are no such things.
 - Veridicalism** Temporal experience has presentness and passage in its content, but only the B-theoretic notions (e.g., Deng (2012)'s view that passage just is succession); our experience is accurate but lacks A-theoretic content.
- › Paul is an Illusionist (about passage, at least); she reject premise (3) of the argument.
- › The alternative Veridicalist view rejects premises (1) and (2) – experience doesn't in fact present us with A-properties, illusory or otherwise; we are misinterpreting experience if we think it does.

Parallel Cases

- › Illusionism is apparently the right view for many cases of perceptual **illusion**.
 - › Suppose you look at a stick in water; due to refraction, the stick ‘looks bent’, i.e., you have a visual experience **as of** the stick being bent. If the surface of the water is not visible, the experience could be **subjectively indistinguishable** from a bent stick.
 - › In that sense, it appears that the property BENT really is part of the content of that experience.
- › By contrast, Veridicalism seems right for cases where we **misinterpret** our experience.
 - › For example, consider your experience of the earth rotating while the sun is visible – i.e., the experience we sometimes say ‘looks as if the sun goes around the Earth’.
 - › But of course this is just what it would look like if the earth was rotating and the sun was fixed in place (Anscombe 1959: 151)! So the property ORBITING THE EARTH cannot be part of the content of this experience; it must be an **interpretation** justified, inconclusively, by this experience.

A Now that Accompanies all our Perceptions

- › When we have **conscious experience** of something – for example, of the blueness of the carpet – that experience has additional components. We are conscious that the blueness is **now**; and we are conscious that the blueness is **here**.
- › **To experience something *just is* to experience it as present here and now.**
 - › Every experience appears to have PRESENTNESS as part of its content.
- › Maybe this is because we are always detecting its presence.
- › But as Doggett pointed out, the fact that HERENESS accompanies all of conscious experience doesn't move us to anti-reductionism about spatial location (Paul 2010, fn. 17).
- › The reductionist says: whatever **qualitative properties**, in us and in our surroundings, **suffice** for phenomenal consciousness, **automatically** suffice for consciousness of presentness: 'reductionists can explain the temporal experience as of nowness as (merely) a feature of consciousness' (Paul 2010: 343).
- › So what's given in experience is not A-NOWNESS; but rather, just the indexical now, or maybe just BEING CONSCIOUS is presented in experience.
 - › This is perhaps best understood as a verdicalist explanation of presentness-phenomenology.

Illusionism

Passage and Change

How, exactly, does our temporal experience support the inference that there is passage? The 'received view' for the antireductionist seems to be that (i) we all have experience as of change ..., that (ii) this experience as of change involves the detection of a certain sort of animated character or flow that really exists in the world, and that (iii) this detection allows us to infer that there is passage (or becoming)....

The argument for the existence of passage relies solely on our experience as of change, rather than on any claim that we somehow directly or independently detect passage as a fundamental feature of the universe (Paul 2010: 345-46)

- › If we experience passage only through experiencing change, and can offer a reductionist account of experience of change, what role is left for the temporal property of passage?
 - » This blocks an argument **for** anti-reductionism (or against reductionism), as noted **earlier**.

The Illusion of Apparent Motion

- › Confronted with a series of **static** stimuli in close temporal proximity, we experience apparent instantaneous motion, although none of the stimuli are moving.
- › See, *inter alia*, TV and movies; the **cutaneous rabbit**, and the beta movement dot illusion below. (Another example: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/o/ob/Beta_movement.gif.)

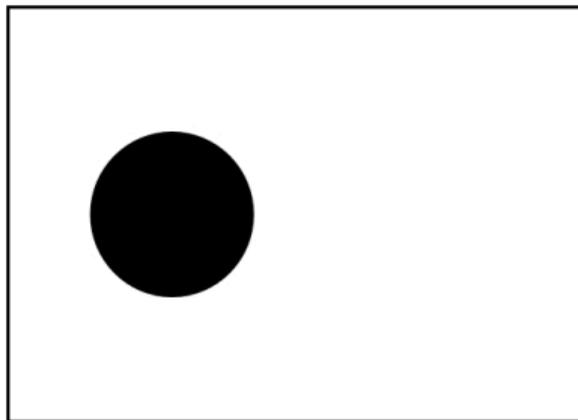


Figure 1: **Beta movement dot illusion**

Two illusions

- › There are in fact **two** illusions here: ‘when a subject knows that she is merely seeing a series of discrete, unmoving images, she will still experience an illusion as of a persisting, moving dot’ (Paul 2010: 350).

The illusion of motion Genuine motion requires the **same object** to be in different places at different times – the so-called ‘at-at’ theory of motion (Russell 1903: ch. LIV). But in the beta movement illusion, just a dot at one place and time, and another dot at another place and time. **Object constancy** is inferred, not observed.

The illusion of instantaneous motion Motion involves mere succession of place; but in the illusion, we see not only the successive locations, but an apparently **fluid ‘slide’** between them. The object not only moves over time, but seems to be **moving** at each point.

Philosophical Upshot of the Illusion

- › The Illusionist says: **some** of our experience of instantaneous motion is an illusion, prompted by **succession** in the pattern of retinal excitations.
- › The illusion has a psychological explanation. Velmans (1991) claims that **pre-conscious** processing of inputs received at **multiple** prior times is **synthesised** to produce a **single** conscious experience.
 - › The role of the afterimage in the moving dot illusion produces a **simultaneous** impression of both where the inferred object **is** and **was**.
 - › Just as **velocity** at a point of time t is wholly grounded in the positions of an object in an interval around t , so our **perceptions of motion** at t are wholly grounded in our perceptions of position over an interval around t , and psychological facts about how we process those perceptions.
- › In the cases of film or the moving dot, we have an singular **experience as of motion**, but **nothing** in the things we experience is **instantaneously moving**.
- › The conclusion we are then invited to draw is that this is how things work in **all** motion perception – **all there is** to motion is succession of place, but the pattern of successive retinal excitations give rise to an appearance of instantaneous motion.

Apparent Change

- › Paul suggests we use this psychological explanation of instantaneous motion when confronted with appropriately similar static images without any need for a fundamental property of ‘movingness’ as a **general model** for the B-theoretic account of experience of change.
- › The ‘**color phi**’ experiment seems to support this (Paul 2010: 350–51): when the color of the dot varies from one static image to the next, we see **apparent motion and change of colour**.
 - › Indeed, apparent change of colour at the midpoint between the two dots, a point never occupied by any dot!
- › The brain synthesises data presented at multiple times into a single conscious experience of change, even though nothing in the stimulus was absolutely **changing**.
 - › Partly this has to do with the fact that at any given moment, the retinal state reflects the environment over a small interval; stimulated rods and cones don’t return instantly to their prior ‘ready’ state.
- › The experience of instantaneous motion in the dot illusion is the same as any experience of instantaneous motion. (Though the illusion of apparent motion may be present, because we are presented with a succession of distinct images.)

The Myth of Passage

when we have an experience as of passage, we can interpret this as an experience that is the result of the brain producing a neural state that represents inputs from earlier and later temporal stages and simply 'fills in' the representation of motion or of changes. ...

the reductionist can use the experimental facts involving apparent motion, apparent change, and apparent persistence to argue that, even though all she endorses is the existence of a static universe of a series of stages, this is sufficient for the brain to produce the illusion of motion and flow involved in the experience as of change. She can argue that ... the series of temporal stages in which O is P and in which O is Q are static inputs that create an experience as of change from O being P at t_1 to O being Q at t_2 . (Paul 2010: 352-53)

Veridicalist Objection: Illusions Require Contrast

to be illusory – in the standard sense used in cognitive science – there should be some cases in which our ... phenomenology co-varies with whatever it represents, and some where it is tricked. According to the illusionist, however, it is never co-varying in this way: we are always being tricked. (Baron, Cusbert, *et al.* 2015: 563)

- › An illusion of apparent motion arises because there are cases where an object is moving (varying in position), and cases which ‘look the same’ but where no object varies in position. Such **contrast cases** allow the inference to an illusion.
- › If instantaneous ‘movingness’ is an illusion, there are no ‘real’ cases to compare with the illusory cases. So, the objection goes, we cannot conclude there is an illusion here – we should instead be **Veridicalists**.
- › One possible response: one can have A-property **content** even if no A-properties are ever instantiated. What matters is that there is a reductionist explanation of how that content arises, not that there ever be veridical cases.
 - › Compare Hume: our idea of **necessary connection** arises when ‘the mind is carried by habit, upon the appearance of one event, to expect its usual attendant’ (Hume 1777: §7.28).

The Redundancy of Passage

- › Paul has argued that our experience of nowness and passage can be explained by the reductionist: the first is a **byproduct** of consciousness, the second an **illusion** produced by plausible psychological mechanisms involved in the synthesis of static stimuli into conscious experiences.
- › Indeed, the psychological mechanisms are so plausible, and so well attested, that **even if** there were a temporal properties of presentness, the best explanation of our experiences would still be that they are an illusion.
 - › Hence (4) is false too (Paul 2010: 357).
- › A-properties are **redundant** even if they exist!

Temporal Content and Temporal Reality

- › Paul argues that while
 1. Our experiences **represent** movement, change, and flow, and
 2. Those experiences are genuinely **perceptual**, nevertheless
 3. Nothing in the **external causes** of those perceptual experiences corresponds directly to the temporal aspects of their content.

[What's notable] about temporal experience is how much psychological complexity it presupposes and how much of it is not generated by interaction with the environment, but generated by internal interaction among representational contents. ... It's not that this phenomenology is not perceptual: it clearly is. It arises from continued interaction with an external environment. It's rather that it doesn't fit the over-simple film projector, or property-tracking model of perception. Over time, as one viewpoint is exchanged for another, we get an emergent phenomenology involving the experience of movement and change (Ismael 2011: 480-81)

What's Real then?

- › There is no simple answer to the question, *which aspects of temporal experience represent something in the causes of that experience (have **objective correlates**)?*
- › Some do – for example, that an event is **remembered** guarantees it is not simultaneous with the present.

But others do not. The fixity of the past and openness of the future are real but perspectival effects. From an embedded perspective, it is right to think ... of the past as fixed and the future as open: transitions between perspectives always close off possibilities that were open in the past. There is nothing illusory about these asymmetries. To say that they are perspectival is to say that they are represented in the temporally unembedded view of reality (i.e. the representation of time that is invariant under transformations between temporal perspectives) by relativization to a point... (Ismael 2011: 481)

'Thank Goodness That's Over'

Prior on Relief

- › Another aspect of temporal experience is our temporally embedded **attitudes**.
 - › An attitude is a mental state that is about some state of affairs: e.g., *belief, knowledge, desire*, etc.
- › There is an argument for the A-theory/anti-reductionism, due originally to Prior (1959), that focuses on the attitude of **relief**:

Suppose after a painful experience I remark 'thank goodness that's over!'. If tenseless [i.e., B-theoretic] facts exhausted reality, then the facts after the experience would be the same as the facts before the experience, so the argument goes; thus it would not be clear what I was thanking goodness for. I am clearly not thanking goodness for the fact that the painful experience is over on 20 October 1998, at 5.23pm, for I might know beforehand the exact date and time when the pain will cease, but I will not then [beforehand] thank goodness for anything. (Sider 2001: 18)

The Priorean Objection

- › The key claim is that one can't be relieved about an **eternal proposition**.
 - › Being relieved is being happy that a given proposition is true only in the past; but the eternalist thinks all propositions are permanent.
- › This is a curious argument. Everyone agrees that
 1. There is no pain at 5:23pm;
 2. There is pain at 4:23pm;
 3. The eternal proposition <the pain is wholly earlier than 5:23pm> is true.
 4. The indexical present-tense sentence *the pain is (now) over* can be used at 5:23pm to express that eternal proposition.
- › What does Prior think is missing? Arguably something like this: the indexical sentence *the pain will cease in 1 hour* can be used at 4:23pm to express **the same** eternal proposition.
- › But no one should be relieved about that at 4:23, even though there is an indexical sentence that expresses the relevant proposition that is truthfully utterable then. So it cannot **just** be the eternal proposition about which we are relieved.
 - › Note that Paul's response seems to miss this; if I am 'thanking goodness at 3pm for the fact that I lack a certain phenomenal property at that time' (2010: 343), then why not do so at noon too?

A Priorean Argument

- (6) We can **coherently** have the attitude of **relief** to the proposition that *the pain is over* at 5:23.
- (7) We cannot **coherently** have the attitude of **relief** to the proposition that *the pain will be over in one hour* at 4:23.
- (8) According to the B-theory, the same tenseless proposition that ⟨the pain is entirely earlier than 5:23pm⟩ is expressed by those indexical sentences in (6) and (7).
- (9) The eternal proposition that ⟨the pain is entirely earlier than 5:23pm⟩ cannot be the appropriate object of the tensed attitudes. (6–8)
- (10) The tensed proposition that ⟨the pain is now over⟩, true at 5:23pm and false at 4:23pm, is an appropriate object of the tensed attitudes (6–7)
- (11) Therefore there must be tensed propositions – A-theory propositions – in addition to B-theory ones. (10, 9)
- (12) Therefore a B-theoretic description of reality is **incomplete**, and the B-theory is false. (11)

Sider's Parody of Prior

- › Someone follows a trail of sugar to tell the messy shopper that they are making a mess; eventually they realise 'I am the messy shopper!' (Perry 1979).
 - (13) We can coherently have the attitude of **surprise** to the proposition that *I am the messy shopper!*.
 - (14) This **cannot** be an attitude to a **third-personal** proposition, for then it could make sense to be surprised at something one already knows – e.g., that *Æ is the messy shopper* (suppose I hear the announcement over the store's PA, and don't realize that I am *Æ*).
 - (15) Therefore there must be **first-personal** propositions in addition to third-personal ones.

The Lesson of the Parody

- › The case of the messy shopper does not motivate us to think that the **third-person** description of reality is incomplete.
- › Even if we must **use** indexical language to express what I newly come to believe, it doesn't follow that we must take the temporal or personal indexicals to reflect novel 'perspectival' facets of reality.

We should say instead that belief and related attitudes are not exhausted by relations to impersonal [and other non-perspectival] propositions. Our understanding of belief, not our understanding of the world, is what is challenged (Sider 2001: 19)

- › Sider accepts (6), (7) and (8), but denies that (9) follows from them.
 - › It does so, according to Sider, only on a certain conception of belief as an **unmediated** propositional attitude.
 - › Prior has a simple theory of the attitudes as directed at complex tensed propositions; Sider wants to offer a complex theory of the attitudes as directed at simple eternal propositions.

'Propositional' Attitudes

Relief is inherently perspectival, in that attitudes of relief do not reduce to attitudes towards eternal propositions. ... A more appropriate object of the attitudes would be what one might call 'temporal propositions': functions from times to (atemporal) propositions. ... A temporal proposition represents a 'perspective' within time; the temporal proposition *over* represents the perspective shared by the set of moments t at which Ted had a painful experience immediately before t . (Sider 2001: 20-21)

- › Sider's 'temporal propositions' are **constructions** made out of times and eternal propositions – they are not the A-theorist's temporarily true genuine propositions.
- › A temporal proposition like *The pain is just now over* takes each moment t to the eternal proposition *The pain ceased immediately prior to t* ; so that temporal proposition expresses true tenseless propositions at some times, and false eternal propositions at other times.
 - » It maps 12:17 to the (let's suppose true) proposition *the pain ceased at 12:16*, and maps 12:18 to the false proposition *the pain ceased at 12:17*.

Character and Content

- › Sider's idea picks up on Kaplan's notion of **character** (Kaplan 1989).
- › Kaplan says that context-sensitive expressions, like indexicals, have two aspects of meaning:
 1. They have a **content**: this is what they refer to.
 2. They have a **character**: this is a rule that determines what they refer to, given the context of utterance.
- › So suppose I use the word *yesterday* on April 12, 2011. The content of that use of *yesterday* is April 11, 2011; the character is something like *the function that maps the context of utterance to the prior day*.
- › In effect, Sider's 'temporal propositions' are Kaplanian characters of sentences, and tenseless propositions are their contents.
 - » So the sentence *yesterday was awful*, uttered at a given time, might have the content *(April 11, 2011 has awfulness)*, and the character *(the day prior to the day of utterance has awfulness)*.

Belief and Sentences

[Sider's proposal] suggests accounting for the cognitive role of tensed thoughts in terms of 'indexical modes of thinking', modes indexical because ... they present different things in different contexts. ...

A Kaplanesque version of this view identifies modes of grasping with Kaplan's characters.... It encourages us to think of 'using' a mode *m* of grasping a proposition as having a belief in virtue of accepting a sentence with *m* as its character. It claims that the special motivational role of my belief that I am flying home today is to be explained in terms of my accepting a sentence with the character of 'I am flying home today'; analogously for the explanation of why I might be relieved when I think, 'I am flying home today', as opposed to 'I am flying home on February 9, 1997'. (Richard 2013: 234)

- There is precedent for something like this in Stalnaker's **metalinguistic** theory of the propositional attitude of **belief** (1984: 72–85); in attributing a belief, both the proposition believed and **how the believer would express it** can matter.

Perspectives

- › For *A believes that p* to be true, according to this view, is for *A* to accept the proposition expressed by *p*, and moreover, to accept it **when presented in the form ‘p’** (rather than in some other way).
 - › So ‘Antony believes that the lecture will soon be over’ is for me (i) to accept *the lecture is over by 18.00 on March 26*, and (ii) to accept it when presented using *soon* – even if I don’t accept it when presented using the explicit date.
- › To be relieved that something is over now, at *t*, involves believing that it is over now. And that involves accepting that the lecture is finished by *t*, and moreover, accepting it when presented using *now*.
- › And this is just to believe that one’s present location – one’s perspective – is after the end of the event (Lewis 1979: §IX).
- › Since perspectives, or contexts, are just **locations** in space and time, there is nothing objectionable about them, according to the B-theory.

The State of Play

- › The A-theorist (temporalist) account of the **propositional attitudes** is appealingly **simple**: they are just relations between individuals and propositions.
 - › But the **propositions are complex**, varying over time in their truth value; and the metaphysics that supports those propositions is more complex, because there needs to be additional metaphysical structure to enable the varying truth of those propositions.
- › The B-theory offers a more complex account of the propositional attitudes, as relations between individuals, propositions, and maybe an ‘indexical’ mode of presentation.
 - › But the metaphysics is simpler: there is **less structure to reality** than the A-theory posits.
- › Some complexity is unavoidable, on either view. We just need to make our choice.
- › The A-theory invokes complexity that is motivated wholly by temporal considerations.
- › The B-theory invokes complexity that is also needed to handle other indexical attitudes: **first-personal belief**, or beliefs about what is *here*, or even beliefs about the meanings of expressions (*Superman is Clark Kent* vs ‘*Superman*’ is co-referring with ‘*Clark Kent*’).
- › On balance I suspect that since we need the kind of machinery the B-theory utilises for other purposes anyway, it is no great cost to use it in the temporal case too, even if it makes our story about ‘thank goodness that’s over’ more complex.

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