

# Experiencing the Present

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*Analysis* 75 (2015): 407-413

There are several differences between (i) seeing rain outside one's window and (ii) episodically remembering seeing rain outside one's window. One difference appears to pertain to *felt temporal orientation*: in episodically remembering seeing the rain, we experience the rain, and/or the seeing of it, as (having occurred in the) past; in perceiving the rain, we experience the rain as (in the) present.<sup>1</sup>

Some philosophers (e.g., Le Poidevin 2007) have noted an air of tension between this apparent phenomenological datum and what seems to be our best metaphysics of time, the so-called B-theory of time. According to the B-theory, there are no such temporal properties as being past, being future, and being present; there are only temporal relations such as earlier-than, later-than, and simultaneous-with. (This contrasts with A-theory, according to which being past, being future, and being present are fundamental temporal properties.) If the B-theory is true, any experience of worldly events as past or present attributes to those events properties that nothing in fact has. In essence, the problem is the apparent tension between (a) the A-theoretic phenomenology of perception and episodic memory and (b) the B-theoretic metaphysics of time itself.

Three general approaches to this problem suggest themselves. One is to claim that, upon reflection, the B-theory is false and many things do instantiate the properties of presentness, pastness, and futurity. Another is to claim that, upon

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<sup>1</sup> It might be thought that there is also a distinctive experience of the future characteristic of (perhaps imagistic) anticipation or expectation. But this is slightly more introspectively controversial, so I will bracket this issue here.

closer inspection, perception and episodic memory do not involve a felt temporal orientation, or at least not the experience of presentness and pastness. A third approach accepts at face value the apparent tension between A-theoretic phenomenology and B-theoretic metaphysics and embraces an 'error theory' of perception and episodic memory.

The literature on the merits and demerits of each of these approaches is enormous; I do not wish to contribute to it directly here. Instead, I want to offer a fourth approach that 'squares the circle': it does justice to the A-theoretic phenomenology while respecting B-theoretic metaphysics, yet without involving error theory. The very coherence of this alternative approach will expose a suppressed assumption that makes the three main approaches seem exhaustive.

To appreciate the alternative approach, let us take a detour through existential belief. Consider the following two belief reports:

- (1) Aaron believes that ghosts exist.
- (2) Baron believes in ghosts.

If we take these reports at face value, they appear to report two similar but structurally slightly different mental states. The similarity is this: both states commit to the existence of ghosts. The structural difference is this: while the commitment to ghosts' existence is built into the *content* of Aaron's mental state, it is built into the *attitude* of Baron's. What Baron believes in is not ghosts' existence, but simply ghosts; the commitment to their existence is built into the very attitude of believing-*in*. We may put this by saying that while Aaron's belief *represents ghosts-as-existent*, Baron's *represents-as-existent ghosts*. In the former the existence-committing element is a component of the represented, in the latter it is a modification of the representing. Thus while in Aaron's belief, existence is part of *what* is represented, in Baron's it is rather an aspect of *how* it is represented.

To be sure, one may not accept (1) and (2) at face value. A traditional view is that (2) is just a lackadaisical way of reporting the belief that ghosts exist. As far as

the psychological reality of existential belief is concerned, all relevant beliefs have the structure suggested by (1). Some philosophers, however, have denied this, arguing that belief in Fs is *irreducible* to belief that Fs exist (Szabó 2003). Others have even attempted the converse reduction: Brentano (1874 II Ch.7) claimed that existence-commitment is always attitudinal (part of the ‘intentional mode,’ as he puts it). On this view, reports like (1) are merely clumsy ways of reporting belief in ghosts. As far as the psychological reality of existential belief is concerned, all relevant beliefs have the structure suggested by (2).

Brentano’s arguments are several, but one is of special pertinence to us. Accepting Kant’s claim that ‘existence is not a property,’ Brentano reasons that any attribution of existence to something would be attribution of a property that nothing has. Accordingly, any existential belief that attributed existence to something would perforce be misattributing and therefore mistaken. But in fact not all existential beliefs are mistaken: it is correct, for example, to believe in ducks. So (correct) commitment to something’s existence cannot involve attribution of a property of existence. If commitment to Fs’ existence is not a matter of attributing existence to Fs, it must instead be built into the very nature of the attitude taken *toward* Fs. This is the attitude of *believing-in*, an attitude whose very *nature* is to represent-as-existent.

Regardless of what we think of Brentano’s argument when it comes to existential belief, an analogous move might prove profitable with respect to the problem of felt temporal orientation. Brentano himself suggests this analogy:

... we must designate temporal differences as modes of [intentionality]. Anyone who considered past, present, and future as differences in objects would be just as mistaken as someone who looked upon existence and nonexistence as real attributes. (Brentano 1911: 279)

Consider a perceptual report such as

(3) Caron perceives rain.

The idea is that we should read (3) on the model of (2): Caron's perception encodes commitment to the rain's presentness, just as Baron's belief encodes commitment to ghosts' existence, but this commitment is built into the attitude rather than content. Caron's perception does not represent rain-as-present, but rather represents-as-present rain. The rain's presentness is thus not part of *what* is experienced in Caron's perception, but part of *how* the experiencing is done in it. This means that no property of presentness is attributed to the rain in Caron's rain perception, just as no property of existence is attributed to ghosts in Baron's belief.

Plausibly, this is an *essential* feature of what it is to perceive: it is built into the very nature of perceiving, as a type of mental state, that it represents-as-present its object (just as it is built into the very nature of belief-in that represents-as-existent its object). Likewise for episodic memory: it is in the very nature of episodic remembering, as a type of mental state, that it represents-as-past the remembered object. This is to say that (4) too should be construed on the model of (2):

(4) Daron episodically remembers seeing rain.

What Daron remembers is rain, not the pastness of the rain (and/or *seeing* the rain, but not the pastness of seeing the rain) – just as what Baron believes in are ghosts, not the existence of ghosts. When we episodically remember seeing rain, we experience the rain (and/or its seeing) as past, but the pastness is not part of *what* the remembering represents – it is an aspect of *how* the remembering represents what it does. There is a feeling of pastness associated with episodic memory, but it is built into its attitudinal nature; it does not appear at the level of content. Again, then, the A-theoretic property of pastness is not attributed to anything (either the rain or the seeing of it), despite the feeling of pastness attending the episodic memory of seeing rain.

This kind of attitudinal encoding (if you will) is not uncommon in our mental life. When we desire a piece of chocolate on the table, there is a sense in which we experience the chocolate as good (or as good for us). But what we desire is not that the chocolate *be* good (for us) – we simply desire the chocolate. When we are afraid

of a snake, there is a sense in which we experience the snake as dangerous (or as dangerous to us). But what we fear is not that the snake *be* dangerous (to us) – we simply fear the snake. One way to make sense of this is to say that the desire represents-as-good the chocolate and the fear represents-as-dangerous the snake. The goodness and danger of the chocolate and snake are not lost in desire and fear, even though the latter do not have goodness and danger in their contents, that is, do not *attribute* goodness and danger; on the contrary, goodness and danger are built into the very nature of the attitudes we take toward the chocolate and the snake. Likewise, I contend, with believing-in, perceiving, and episodic remembering. In particular, temporal orientation is not lost in perception and episodic memory, even though the latter do not attribute presentness and pastness; rather, the temporal orientation is built into the very nature of perception and episodic memory as attitudes we take toward events.<sup>2</sup>

(This may well be what Le Poidevin (2007: 77) is going for when he claims that the fact that we perceive events as present is a ‘trivial fact’ insofar as there is no difference between perceiving something and perceiving it as present. The idea must be that it is built into the very nature of perception as a type of mental state that whatever it represents it represents-as-present. Brentano, meanwhile, uses this attitudinal approach to temporal awareness to diffuse a puzzle about hearing a melody, namely, that at a single moment we seem to enjoy sensuous awareness of both the note currently playing and the note just played. How is it that in such a case we do not experience the audible superposition of both notes? Brentano’s answer is that the two awarenesses are kept separate by representing their objects in different *ways*. Calling the awareness of the current note ‘aesthesia’ and that of the note just past ‘proteraesthesia,’ he writes:

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<sup>2</sup> To that extent, some readings of the so-called transparency of experience (Harman 1990) may be overstated: although there is a sense in which attitudinal features such as representing-as-present and representing-as-good are *representational* features, they are not *content* features. There are ways to construe transparency as consistent with this, but there are also ways to construe it as inconsistent. The latter are, by our lights, too strong to be plausible.

What then is the essential difference in the [experience] of the proteraesthesia as compared to the aesthesis? The way to the only possible answer is clearly indicated. Sensing is mental reference to an object. Such relations may differ either because of a difference in objects, or because of a difference in the nature of the relation to the same object.... Thus we can say that proteraesthesia indeed has the same object as aesthesis, but that it relates to it in a different way... (Brentano 1928: 36, a dictation from Boxing Day 1914)

The idea seems to be that aesthesis represents-as-present its object while proteraesthesia represents-as-just-past its object. Regardless of whether this is a good solution to the puzzle Brentano is concerned with, it seems to generate the resources for an attitudinal account of felt temporal orientation.)

The key in the attitudinal account of felt temporal orientation, to summarize, is that perceptual experience has an A-theoretic phenomenology, insofar as it involves a feeling of presentness, because it exhibits the attitudinal property of representing-as-present; and episodic memory involves a feeling of pastness because it exhibits the attitudinal property of representing-as-past. Crucially, however, this does not involve attributing the property of presentness to the object perceived, nor the property of pastness to remembered events – not any more than the attitudinal property of representing-as-existent characteristic of belief-in involves attribution of a property of existence. Accordingly, even if the B-theoretic metaphysics of time is correct, and there are no such properties as presentness and pastness (just as existence is not a property), perceptual experiences and episodic memories do not involve misattribution of such properties and to that extent are not systematically illusory.

The attitudinal account of felt temporal orientation helps make sense of certain self-locating beliefs or judgments, namely, *temporally self-locating* ones. The perceptual experience of rain supports two kinds of perceptual judgment: (J<sub>1</sub>) that it is raining and (J<sub>2</sub>) that it is raining *now*. Plausibly, both encode the same temporal information, but while in J<sub>2</sub> this information figures in the content, in J<sub>1</sub> it does not. However, given that J<sub>1</sub> can be formed non-inferentially, by simple *endorsement* of the perceptual experience of rain, it is natural to suppose that J<sub>1</sub> replicates the

intentional structure of that experience. Accordingly, it encodes the temporal orientation in its attitude. Insofar as the attitudinal feature characteristic of beliefs and judgments in general is that of representing-as-true (when one judges that  $p$ , one's judgment represents-as-true  $p$ ), we might suggest that a restricted class of judgments exhibit the more specific attitudinal property of representing-as-true-in-the-present. These are the temporally self-locating judgments.<sup>3</sup>

Might the same reasoning apply to other types of self-locating belief, such as *spatially* and *modally* self-locating ones? This depends in part on whether phenomena analogous to the felt temporal orientation of perception and episodic memory can be found elsewhere in our mental life. This issue is too complex to do justice to here; I will restrict myself to two initial observations. First, the contrast between perception and imagination might plausibly enough be said to provide a modal analogue of the temporal difference between perception and episodic memory. Compare a visual experience of rain and a visualization of (qualitatively indistinguishable) rain. One might argue that the two have the same content, but differ in attitude: while the visual experience represents-as-actual the rain, the visualization represents-as-merely-possible the rain.<sup>4</sup> Insofar as the visual experience supports both the judgment that it is raining and the judgment that it is raining *actually*, and insofar as the former judgment can be formed by simple *endorsement* of that experience, the relevant judgment might be claimed to be modally self-locating, and be so in virtue of exhibiting the attitudinal property of representing-as-true-in-the-actual-world. Secondly, no analogous contrast for spatial orientation imposes itself. We have experiences of here and there, left and right, top and down, and so on – but all appear to be *perceptual* experiences.

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<sup>3</sup> This leaves open the question of how the perceptual experience of rain supports  $J_2$ , the judgment that it is raining *now*. Two options present themselves. One is to claim that some inference from  $J_1$  to  $J_2$  is required. The other is to claim that there is some non-inferential operation, similar to but different from endorsement, that takes one from  $J_1$  to  $J_2$ . I remain neutral on this question here.

<sup>4</sup> The argument would be particularly plausible if we think there are no such properties as being actual and being merely possible; I remain neutral on this question.

According to the attitudinal account of felt temporal orientation, it is in the very nature of perceiving, as a type of mental state, to represent-as-present, and in the very nature of episodic memory, as another type of mental state, to represent-as-past; but *what* is represented can be strictly the same. One is hard pressed to think of two types of mental state whose very essence is to represent-as-left and represent-as-right, but which can represent the same thing in these two different ways. Accordingly, it is more natural to take left and right to be built into the *content* of perceptual experience, and likewise for the other dimensions of spatial self-location. (This leaves open the question of why there should be this asymmetry between the spatial and temporal cases. The issue is profitably thought of as material for future research within the attitudinal-property framework.)

In this paper, I have focused on the temporal dimension of experience, in particular the felt temporal orientation of perception and episodic memory. This aspect of experience appears to clash with the best metaphysics of time we have, inviting three variously unsatisfying approaches: revising the metaphysics, redescribing the phenomenology, or adopting error theory. The suppressed assumption shared by all three approaches, however, is this: if perception of an event has the felt temporal orientation of presentness, then it attributes presentness to that event. This assumption misses the daylight between representing X-as-present and representing-as-present X, and more generally between aspects of the represented and modifications of the representing. It is this daylight that illuminates perception's feeling of presentness in a B-theoretic world.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> For comments on a previous draft, I am grateful to Anna Giustina, Ben Phillips, François Recanati, and an anonymous referee for *Analysis*.



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