

# Tense as a Feature of Perceptual Content<sup>1</sup>

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The strongest argument for the A-theory of time seems to be that we can somehow experience that time passes. Since it seems to us that time pass, so the argument goes, we need very good reasons to reject the A-theory. Recently however, several philosophers have challenged the assumption behind this argument.<sup>2</sup> They argue to the contrary that we never perceive events as present or past, but merely as simultaneous, earlier or later in relation to each other. In this paper I wish to defend the assumption behind the A-theory that we can indeed perceive events as present and past. Whether or not this gives much support for the A-theory however, is a separate question which I shall mostly refrain from discussing.

My argument will be presented in three steps. In the first section I shall introduce some main assumptions behind my argument. These are mainly assumptions pertaining to the nature of perception. I shall assume that an intentionalistic theory of perception is correct and that we are in some non-intentional sense experiencing having a perception. In the second section I shall argue that we experience our perceptions as being present. I shall then go on to argue that the structure of time-consciousness is such that we experience some perceptions as

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<sup>2</sup> See for example Barry Dainton, *Stream of Consciousness. Unity and Continuity in Conscious Experience* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000); Christoph Hoerl, "Time and Tense in Perceptual Experience", *Philosophers Imprint*, IX, 12 (December 2009): 1-18; Robin Le Poidevin, *The Images of Time* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); D.H. Mellor, *Real Time II* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998); Simon Prosser, "Could We Experience the Passage of Time", *Ratio*, XX, 1 (March 2007):75-90.

present and others as past. In the third section I shall argue that provided that we experience some perceptions as present and others as past, the events presented in those perceptions are also presented as past and present. In the fourth section I discuss some objections against the notion that perceptual content is tensed.

## 1 Some Basic Features of an Intentionalistic Theory of Time-Consciousness

A guiding assumption behind this paper is that some version of an intentionalistic theory of perception is correct.<sup>3</sup> This means minimally that we must make a careful distinction between perceptual content and perceptual object. A perception (or an act of perception as the phenomenologists would say) presents the perceiver with an object in virtue of having a certain content. Perceptual content prescribes that a certain object exists in the vicinity of the perceiver. This gives the perception certain conditions of satisfaction. In the event that there is an object satisfying these conditions, the perception is about this object. If there is no such object, the perception seems to the perceiver to be about an object, but in reality there is none. The perception nevertheless has a certain content. When perceptual acts are veridical, they have as their objects ordinary entities existing outside the mind of the perceiver. When perceptual acts are not veridical, they lack objects altogether.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> For influential versions of intentionalistic theories of perception, see for example Edmund Husserl, *Logische Untersuchungen I-II*, edited by Elmar Holenstein (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1975/1984 [1900/1901]); François Recanati, *Perspectival Thought. A Plea for Moderate Relativism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); John Searle, *Intentionality. An Essay in the Philosophy of Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); David Woodruff Smith, *The Circle of Acquaintance. Perception, Consciousness, and Empathy* (Dordrecht, Boston, London: Kluwer, 1989), Michael Tye, *Ten Problems of Consciousness* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: The MIT Press, 1995). My own preferred account is a version of Smith's account. See Jan Almäng, "The Causal Self-Referential Theory of Perception Revisited", *Dialectica*, LXVII, 1 (March 2013): 29-53.

<sup>4</sup> I should stress that unless explicitly stated, I will not use "perceive" as a success-word, but as a term indicating how the world perceptually appears to a subject.

Most intentionalists would presumably agree with the account given so far. There is however little agreement among intentionalists as to the nature of the object of perception. Some intentionalists hold that the object of a perception is a state of affairs.<sup>5</sup> Other intentionalists hold the object to be concrete entities such as cats and chairs and flowers.<sup>6</sup> My own position is fairly inclusive. Let us use the term “object” in the widest sense possible so as to cover any entity that might exist. Events, processes, substances, relations and properties are consequently all examples of objects. I would now say that substances (here taken in a fairly non-technical sense to refer to ordinary concrete entities such as animals and artifacts), relations and properties are perceivable. These objects can however also enter as constituents into various complexes. A complex is here taken to mean an entity composed of at least one object exemplifying a property and / or being related to another object. At least some of those complexes (for example: the chair is green, the cat is to the left of the dog, Mary hugs John and so on) are also perceivable.

Both substances and the complexes they are the constituents of are perceivable. It is to be noted that I do not mean that we see substances through these complexes or vice versa. We see them both directly. Some of these complexes I will assume to have *temporal parts*. W.E. Johnson distinguished between occurrents and continuants.<sup>7</sup> A continuant is something that can exist throughout a certain period of time and that is wholly present at each point in time in which it exists. A substance is the classical example of a continuant, but one might presumably also construe property-instances and relations as continuants. An occurrent can also exist throughout a certain period of time. But unlike continuants, occurrents have temporal parts. They are never present in their entirety at any one point in time. They are temporally extended complexes. Whether or not substances really are continuants is obviously

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<sup>5</sup> Cf Searle, *Intentionality*.

<sup>6</sup> Cf Smith, *The Circle of Acquaintance*.

<sup>7</sup> W.E. Johnson, *Logic. Part III* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1924).

a contested point in philosophy. In this paper I shall regularly refer to substances and properties as continuants, but that is merely in order to keep them separate from processes, the paradigmatic examples of occurrents. Nothing in the paper hinges on them actually being continuants. I shall however assume that events and processes are perceivable.

Processes can be *static* or *dynamic*. A process is static during a certain period of time if no continuant constituting the process undergoes a change, begins to exist, or cease to exist, during the period in question. If this is not the case, a process is dynamic. Essential elements in dynamic processes are events. An event lacks temporal extension, but it is not a continuant. It is however existentially dependent upon continuants. When a continuant ceases or begins to exist, or when it changes in any respect, an event occurs.

Processes have temporal parts. The process consisting of a match of football has for example temporal parts in the sense that it consists of various events and (shorter) processes constituting the game – the referee blows for kickoff, the first team scores, the second team goes on the attack, there is a substitution, and so on. These events and processes are however not identical to each other: the game of football is not in its entirety present at any single point in time and it makes no sense to claim thus. A process has by definition temporal parts.

If the claim that processes are perceivable is correct, it follows that perceptual content must present the perceiver with an object that is temporally extended. The object of our perception is consequently never given as a mere unextended point in time. This claim is obviously not new in the philosophy of time-consciousness. It was made famous long ago by William James. Here is James:

In short, the practically cognized present is no knife-edge, but a saddle-back, with a certain breadth of its own on which we sit perched, and from which we look in two directions into time. The unit of composition of our perception of time is a duration, with a bow and a stern,

as it were – a rearward- and a forward looking end. It is only as parts of this *duration-block* that the relation of *succession* of one end to the other is perceived.<sup>8</sup>

James called “the practically cognized present” *the specious present*. I shall employ this notion to refer to the length of the process that is presented in an act of perception.

James claim has not gone unopposed,<sup>9</sup> but most philosophers discussing time-consciousness seems to accept that perceptual content present a temporally extended object.<sup>10</sup> We shall follow them in accepting the proposition expressed by i):

i) Perceptual content always presents us with processes.

It is now to be noted that the length of the temporal extension we are presented with is by definition a specious present. It is also to be noted that i) does not claim that all perceivable objects are occurrents. As we have seen, some perceivable objects are not occurrents.

If we return to the quote from James we can see that he endorses a further claim, viz, that the specious present is structured. It is not merely that we are perceptually presented with a temporally extended object. What we are perceptually presented with is given as having temporal parts which are presented as succeeding and preceding each other in time. Most philosophers endorsing i), would endorse this claim as well. We can call this claim ii):

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<sup>8</sup> William James, *The Principles of Psychology. Volume One* (New York: Dover Publications), see p. 609f.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Ian Philips, “Perceiving Temporal Properties”, *European Journal of Philosophy*, XVIII, 2 (June 2010):176-202.

<sup>10</sup> Dainton, *Stream of Consciousness. Unity and Continuity in Conscious Experience*; Edmund Husserl, *Zur Phänomenologie des Inneren Zeitbewusstseins (1893-1917)*, edited by R.Boehm, (Haag: Martinus Nijhoff 1966); Alexius Meinong, ”Über Gegenstände Höherer Ordnung und deren Verhältnis zur Inneren Wahrnehmung”, in his *Abhandlungen zur Erkenntnistheorie und Gegenstandstheorie* (Graz: Akademische Druck- u. Verlagsanstalt 1971 [1899]), pp 377-480.

ii) We are perceptually presented with an object with temporal parts, in the sense that the temporal parts of the object are presented as succeeding and preceding each other in time.

The temporal parts of a process presented in the specious present might well be presented as having a certain temporal duration as well. But they might also be events and lack temporal extension.

So far my account has presumably been relatively uncontroversial. I now wish to make the more controversial assumption that we must distinguish between *perceptual* time-consciousness, or our perception of processes as extended in time, and *experiential* time-consciousness, or our experience of our perceptions as being located in a stream of succeeding and preceding perceptions. According to intentionalists we must distinguish between perceptual content and perceptual object. A common position that I now wish to endorse is that acts of perception have a certain phenomenal character, or *qualia*. There is a certain way it is like to have an act of perception. I shall express this by saying that whereas we *perceive* (external) objects, we *experience* having certain perceptions. A perceptual experience is thus by definition a perception with a certain phenomenal character. But it is important to point out that it is not an intention directed at a perception. The perception is not given as an intentional object, but rather *sui generis* as something that we experience.

Now, if acts of perception presents us with temporally extended objects, and if we can experience having a perception, then it is surely plausible to assume that we experience not a momentary perception, but rather an extended sequence of perceptions. So if we perceive the process consisting of “do-re-mi” sounding, then it is also reasonable to assume that we experience perceiving “do-re-mi”. What we experience perceiving is consequently given as having the same temporal duration as the object we perceive:

iii) We experience a temporally extended sequence of perceptions spanning a specious present.

It is now important to note that just as it is possible to perceptually distinguish temporal parts within a specious present, it is also possible to discern temporal parts in our perceptual experience. It is not only the case that we perceive “do” as preceding “re”, we are also experiencing the perception of “do” as preceding the perception of “re”. So if we endorse i) to iii), we should also endorse iv):

iv) Our perceptual experience has temporal parts, in the sense that it is an experience of a whole composed of parts (single acts of perception) which are experienced as succeeding and preceding each other in time.

Perhaps I should stress at this point that iii) and iv) is to be interpreted in the sense that it seems to us as if the experience has a certain duration and certain temporal parts. Whether or not the act is stretched out in time and really has temporal parts is a separate question.

Intentionalists who believe that we can see processes and that perceptions have a phenomenal character should presumably be able to accept i) to iv). It is however possible to be an intentionalist and believe that perceptions have a phenomenal character, yet deny iii) and iv). On some modern accounts perceptual content is transparent in the sense that when we perceive, we are only aware of purported features of the perceptual object.<sup>11</sup> So on such an account, the phenomenal character of an experience is identical to the presentation of the object. When we see a red apple, we are only aware of a red apple. We are not in addition aware of any features of the act of perception. Consequently, if it is denied that phenomenal

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. Tye, *Ten Problems of Consciousness*.

character is anything over and above the intentional properties of the perception, it is easy enough to deny iii) and iv) as well.

If iii) and iv) is denied by an intentionalist, experiential time-consciousness would collapse into perceptual time-consciousness. Experiencing a sequence of perceptions, would be tantamount to perceive a temporally extended object. In the next section I will argue that perceptual *experiences* by necessity are tensed. If it is denied that we can make a distinction between perceptual time-consciousness and experiential time-consciousness, perceptual time-consciousness would consequently automatically be tensed as well. My assumption that we can make a substantial distinction between experiential- and perceptual time-consciousness is consequently not an assumption that is of any particular help for establishing my overall thesis in this paper. It would not help the defender of tenseless perceptual content if it is rejected. Rather, it offers the defender of tenseless content further possibilities to block my argument.

## 2 Tense and Experience

In this section I wish to argue that experiential time-consciousness is tensed. In the present context this means that some of our perceptions are experienced as present, and some as past. I will start by defending the claim that some perceptions are experienced as present, and then turn to the other claim.

I will initially argue to the effect that v) is correct:

v) Experiential time consciousness is tensed in the sense that we experience presently perceiving thus and so.

There are two very good arguments to the effect that v) is correct.<sup>12</sup>

The first argument is due to Hugh Mellor. He notes that to the extent that we reflect on an experience when we have it, we are justified in judging<sup>13</sup> that it occurs now. So at any time  $t$  when we are in an experiential state  $e$ , we are justified in judging at  $t$  that  $e$  is now. Mellor then goes on to note that this judgment cannot be a tautology.<sup>14</sup> The argument seems to be that the person making the judgment in question does not ascribe presentness to all the experiences he has had. Presumably he can judge that some of his experiences have occurred in the past. So it cannot be a tautology to judge that  $e$  occurs now.

Now, if judgments to the effect that an experience is present are contingent and synthetic these judgments must be based on something. The only available candidate here would be the experience itself. So being present must be based on an aspect of the experience itself. We are according to Mellor directly aware of this.<sup>15</sup> We can express this by saying that experiential time-consciousness must at least be presently tensed.

There is a second argument to the same effect. Intentionalists normally hold that the object of a perception is determined by the content of the perception. But it is also held that two different acts of perception occurring in quite different contexts could have qualitatively identical content. I am for example currently looking at a computer monitor. This means minimally that perceptual content presents me with a computer monitor. We can now assume that this is a veridical perception. But it is also possible that I could be perceptually presented

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<sup>12</sup> For a quite different third argument see L.A. Paul, "Temporal Experience", this JOURNAL, CVII, 7 (July 2010): 333-359, see p. 342 and Bradford Skow, "Relativity and the Moving Spotlight", this JOURNAL, CVI, 12 (December 2009): 666-678, see p. 677.

<sup>13</sup> Though Mellor expresses the argument in terms of beliefs.

<sup>14</sup> Mellor, *Real Time II*, p. 43f.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

with a computer monitor in exactly the same way and be hallucinating. These two perceptions presumably have the same perceptual content, yet it is only one perception that has an object. So we encounter a problem. Two different acts with the same content could differ with respect to whether they have an object, even though the content is said to determine the object.

One answer given by intentionalists to this problem is to argue that perceptual content is constituted by certain indexicals. Thus it is not merely the case that I see a computer monitor. It is also the case that I experience *presently* seeing a computer monitor *here*.<sup>16</sup> On such an account, it might not necessarily be the case that we see processes and objects as tensed, but we *experience* presently seeing certain processes. Perceptual content would on such a construal look something like the following:

a) I experience presently seeing a computer monitor here.

Tense is not necessarily a perceived property of an object, but an aspect of the experience of having a perception. In virtue of the present tense indexical, different acts of perception having the same content can have different objects in different contexts and no object at all in other contexts.

The important point in the present context is that intentionalism seems to presuppose an account according to which perceptual content is tensed in some way. And if perceptual objects are not presented as tensed, then tense must be an aspect of the perceptual experience.

Before we leave the defense of principle v), it should be noted that I am now assuming that tensed content is generally irreducible to tenseless content. The best argument for this position

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<sup>16</sup> This seems to be the position taken in Recanati, *Perspectival Thought* and Smith, *The Circle of Acquaintance*. See also Jan Almäng, "Time, Mode and Perceptual Content", *Acta Analytica*, XXVII, 4 (December 2012): 425-439.

that I know of has been presented by Hugh Mellor. Mellor's argument is couched in terms of propositions. But the argument can easily be adapted to perceptions if it is held that perceptions have non-propositional content.

Mellor argues that whereas propositions with tensed content have b-truth-conditions, they are irreducible to beliefs without tensed content. Mellor's main argument is that if tensed propositions were reducible to tenseless propositions, then in order to believe a tensed proposition, one must be able to believe the corresponding tenseless proposition. But, suppose that I believe on the second of May that I shall go to the dentist tomorrow, then this requires that I must believe that I shall go to the dentist on the third of May. But this does not appear to be the case.<sup>17</sup> In a similar way, I might easily imagine a situation in which I on the second of May experience presently seeing a dentist. But this does not mean that it is an aspect of the experience that the perception of the dentist occurs on the second of May.

The second claim I wish to defend in this section is claim vi):

vi) It is only a part of a perception which is experienced as present. Other parts are experienced as past.

If my arguments in the previous section are correct, perceptual content presents us with entities with temporal parts. Perceptual content can consequently be divided with respect to which temporal part of the object they present us with. When we hear the sequence "do-re-mi", one part of content presents us with "do", one part with "re" and yet a further part with "mi". If principle iv) is correct experiential time-consciousness is structured in the sense that the various parts of perceptual content are not experienced as simultaneous. If principle v) is correct, presentness is an aspect of perceptual experiences as well. The principle vi) now

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<sup>17</sup> Mellor, *Real Time II*, p. 58ff.

states that some parts of perceptual content are experienced as present (for example “mi), and some parts are experienced as past (for example “do-re”). So in virtue of vi), it is not merely the case that we presently experience perceiving thus and so, we can also experience perceiving thus and so in the past. The past in question however stretches no further than the specious present and must not be confused with a memory of any kind.

If principles i) to v) are accepted, there is only one way to block vi), and that is to argue that even though we experience a succession between various perceptions (or parts thereof) presenting us with the perceived process, we do not experience any perception as *past*. On such an account we would both have an experience of presently perceiving thus and so and an experience of a succession of perceptions, but no experience of any perception being located in the past. Perceptions would have a three-tiered temporal structure. First, there would be an experience of locating a sequence of perceptions in the present. Secondly, these perceptions would be experienced as temporally ordered. Thirdly, the object of perception would be presented as temporally structured.

According to this account then, when hearing “do-re-mi” we would experience presently first perceiving “do”, then perceiving “re” and finally perceiving “mi”. The natural question would now be what the present tense operator refers to in this context. There seems to be two options: Either it would refer to an unextended point in the sequence of perceptions, or it would refer to the entire sequence of perceptions. In the first case the experience would seem rather odd. For then it would be the case that it was, for example, only the last of the perceptions in the sequence which was experienced as present. If however, one of the perceptions is experienced as present and the previous perceptions as preceding that perception, then it seems natural to conclude that the other perceptions are experienced as past. But then vi) would after all be a correct principle.

But the other option is no less riddled with difficulties. If the present tense operator in the experience refers to the entire sequence of perceptions, all the perceptions must be experienced as present. But it is difficult to see how this position could be squared with iv), the notion that we have an experience of a sequence of perceptions. This position seems to entail that we experience the sequence of perceptions as having different values in B-time, yet the same value in A-time. But this seems if not outright contradictory at least highly problematic.<sup>18</sup> I conclude then, that vi) is a sound principle.

### 3 Perceiving Tensed Events

If the argument so far is correct, experiential time-consciousness must be tensed. This means that when we perceive an event, we experience having a sequence of perceptions, one of which is experienced as present, whereas the others are experienced as past. If this is correct, one important implication for theories of time-consciousness follows: Acts of perception cannot be spread out in time, they must be punctual.

It is in this context important to distinguish between the time of the act, and the time of the content. The time of the act is the time when a perceiver has a certain perception. The time of the content on the other hand is the time that the perceived object is presented as occupying. A contested issue in this respect pertains to the relationship between the time of the act and the time of the content. According to one influential account the time of the content coincides with the time of the act.<sup>19</sup> This means that every perceptual act that presents the perceiver with

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<sup>18</sup> For a very similar point made for quite different reasons, see Le Poidevin, *The Images of Time*, p. 81.

<sup>19</sup> For an extensive defence, see Dainton, *Stream of Consciousness*.

a process must have the same temporal extension as the process is presented as having. On this account it is impossible to perceive a process at a single point in time. At any period in time which is shorter than the duration of the process as presented, one can only entertain a temporal part of the perceptual content. It is not merely the case that an act of perception presents objects with temporal parts, it has temporal parts itself. The principle underlying this conception of the relationship between the time of the act and the time of the content has been coined the “Principle of Presentational Concurrence”, or PPC for short, by Iczhak Miller.<sup>20</sup>

According to an alternative account, acts of perception are not spread out in time. Even though perceptual content presents us with an object with temporal parts, the act itself is instantaneous and the time of the act does not coincide with the time of the content. Miller calls the principle underlying this position for the “Principle of Simultaneous Awareness”, or PSA for short.<sup>21</sup> According to PSA, it is possible to entertain the complete content of an act of perception in a single instant. So it might well be that when hearing “do-re-mi”, the act of perception might be simultaneous with the actual sounding of “mi”, even though the content entertained at that point in time would present an extended object.

Now, if my arguments in the previous sections are correct, it follows that only a part of the perceptual content will be experienced as present. As Christoph Hoerl has pointed out, PPC is incompatible with the notion of tensed content.<sup>22</sup> Different parts of perceptual content could not have different tenses if PPC were true. In order for us to be able to experience hearing (for example) the sound “do” as past, the hearing of “do” must linger on in consciousness for a short while. The hearing of “do” will first be experienced as present and subsequently as past. But this contradicts the core of PPC, according to which all acts of perception are spread out in time, and no piece of perceptual content lingers on in consciousness.

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<sup>20</sup> Iczhak Miller, *Husserl, Perception and Temporal Awareness* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: The MIT Press, 1984).

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, p. 107-110.

<sup>22</sup> Hoerl, “Time and Tense in Perceptual Experience”.

In his account of time-consciousness, Husserl made a crucial distinction between primal impressions and retentions.<sup>23</sup> In a slightly reformulated version of the distinction, we can say that that part of the perceptual content which presents the temporal part of the object that is perceived as simultaneous with the act of perception itself, is a “primal impression”. It is experienced as present. If the perceiver functions normally, the content of the primal impression resides in consciousness for a short period of time. This means that in the subsequent act of perception, it lingers on as a retention and is no longer experienced as present, but as past. This act of perception has a novel primal impression which will also linger on for a short while, and so on. Strictly speaking, when experiencing a past perception, this perception is not present in consciousness. What is present is a *modified* form of a *part* of that perception, viz. a primal impression that has been modified into a retention. The other parts of that act of perception need not be present at all in even a modified form.

I will not here defend PSA, but merely note that my account entails it.<sup>24</sup> Let me now return to the main argument of the paper. I have argued that we must distinguish between perceptual time-consciousness and experiential time-consciousness. But what is the relationship between these two kinds of consciousness? I would suggest that it is a very close relationship, such that we experience the perception as simultaneous with the object perceived. More specifically, I suggest that vii) is a correct principle:

vii) If  $c$  is a part of the content presenting the process  $p$ , such that  $c$  presents the temporal part  $t$  of  $p$ , then  $c$  and  $t$  are experienced as simultaneous.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Husserl, *Zur Phänomenologie des Inneren Zeitbewusstseins*.

<sup>24</sup> For defences of PSA, see Husserl, *Zur Phänomenologie des Inneren Zeitbewusstseins* and Rick Grush “Temporal Representation and Dynamics”, *New Ideas in Psychology*, XXVI, 2 (August 2008):146-157.

<sup>25</sup> Note that vii) does not entail that any part of content is experienced *as* a part. Clearly, this is often not the case.

According to vii) each part of perceptual content is experienced as simultaneous with the temporal part of the object that it presents. If it is accepted that our perception is experienced as simultaneous with the object perceived – and I cannot see how that could be denied – it seems obvious that vii) is a sound principle.

If vii) is a correct principle it is natural to examine the relationship between the experience and the perceived object with respect to their temporal properties. To the present author it seems reasonable to suppose that the following principle is correct:

viii) A part of the perceptual content  $c$  is experienced as exemplifying a temporal property  $p$  where  $p$  might be a relational property, if and only if  $c$  intends a temporal part  $t$  of the perceived process  $q$ , such that  $t$  is presented as exemplifying  $p$ .

What is said in viii) of temporal parts, also applies to events. So according to principle viii), if an event  $e$  is presented as occurring later than an event  $f$ , then the content presenting  $e$  is experienced as later than  $f$ . Obviously, the same would go for tensed properties. Now, I know of no discussion in the philosophical literature of a principle resembling viii),<sup>26</sup> but it seems at any rate to me to be an intuitively plausible principle. If we assume that we experience a perception as present, would we not also perceive its object as present, provided that the object and the experience is given as simultaneous? It is, I take it, impossible to deny that the perception and its object would be experienced as having the same tenseless properties. But then it would seem hard to deny that they would be experienced as having the same tensed properties.

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<sup>26</sup> Clifford Williams however seems to reject a similar idea. His theory differs however from mine both with respect to the perceptual framework it is presented in and with respect to tensed content, which he thinks is reducible to tenseless content. See Clifford Williams Williams, “The Phenomenology of B-Time”, *The Southern Journal of Philosophy*, XXX, 2 (Summer 1992):123-137.

If viii) is accepted, the argument that we can perceive events (or processes) as tensed cannot be stopped. Together with principle vi), principle viii) entails that we can perceive an event (or possibly process) as present or past. For if it is the case that a part of perceptual content is experienced as present, then it follows according to principle viii) that the corresponding temporal part of the perceived object is also perceived as present. If, on the other hand, the content is experienced as past, the corresponding object will also be perceived as past.

This completes my defence of the thesis that perceptual content is tensed. In the next section I wish to consider some objections to it.

#### 4 Some Objections to the Notion of Tensed Content

In this section I wish to discuss some prominent objections to the notion of tensed perceptual content. I shall argue that none of them presents a challenge to the notion of tensed content that cannot be met.

The Argument from Illusion.

The first argument to be considered is due to Hugh Mellor. As we have seen, Mellor believes that experiences are tensed, but he denies that tensed properties are perceivable – this would amount to a rejection of viii), but Mellor does not discuss that principle. Mellor argues that if we could perceive the A-times of events, they would frequently be radically misperceived.

Here is Mellor:

For a start, we do not really observe the A-times of events. The idea that we do comes from confusing what we observe with the experience of observing it. Suppose I look through a telescope at events far off in space. I see two events and the order they occur in: which is earlier, which later. I do *not* see their A-times: the telescope does not show me how long ago those events occurred. What tells me that is whatever theory tells me how far off the events are and how long it takes light to travel that distance. We used, after all, to think that many celestial events were much closer to the earth, and thus much more recent, than we now think they are. So, depending on our theory, we might locate the celestial events we see anywhere on the A-scale from a few minutes ago to millions of years ago. Either way they will look exactly the same.<sup>27</sup>

I am not exactly sure how to interpret this argument but it seems to me as if Mellor argues that we cannot see events as tensed because when seeing events through a telescope that lies in the distant past, perception does not present them to us as lying in the distant past. So in this case either the perception does not present us with tensed properties of events, or the perception is radically erroneous. The latter cannot be the case, so the event is not presented as tensed at all.

If this is Mellor's argument it seems to the present author erroneous. If it is plausible to suppose that we could perceive events as tensed, then some (or all depending upon your theory of perception) perceivers would perceive an event in distant space as present even though it occurred in the distant past. But this is no problem for the defender of tensed content. First, in the case at hand the perceiver would suffer an illusion. Perceptual content would present an event as having a property (being present in time) that it in fact lacks. But this is not stranger than that we could suffer illusions with respect to the location of events, or with respect to the properties of objects perceived.

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<sup>27</sup> Mellor, *Real Time II*, p. 16.

Moreover, if Mellor is right (and indeed I think he is!) that tensed properties would be radically misperceived in such cases were they perceived, it is also true that tenseless temporal properties would be equally misperceived. Consider once again the case described by Mellor above, and let us assume that we perceive the two events simultaneously. Then we would presumably perceive the events *as* simultaneous. Unbeknownst to us however, one event occurs in this solar system, while another event occurs in a galaxy far away. If that is the case the latter event would surely occur earlier than the former event. Yet both events would be perceived as occurring simultaneously. So the perception of the tenseless properties would be just as mistaken as the perception of the tensed properties. But Mellor would surely hold that we can perceive events as located in B-time.

But perhaps it might at this point be objected that there is always a time lag between an event and the perception of the said event. Events located very close to us occurred slightly before we perceive them, even though they are perceived as present. So if we perceive tensed properties, then all perceptions must be illusory. This objection is probably correct, but I do not see the force of the argument. First, if we assume that the experience of having a perception is given as simultaneous with the perceived event all perceptions would be illusory whether or not we assume that events are perceived as tensed. Secondly, it is probably true that we can never see the exact determinate spatial shape of objects. It is always the case that they are at the microscopic level shaped in ways we cannot discern. Perceptual content is in this case never exactly veridical, but it can be more or less veridical, and what we construe as a veridical perception in the normal case, might in reality be very close to being veridical, but not completely so. Something similar is true of tensed properties. When you see a cat chase a mouse outside your window, the perception is more veridical with respect to tense, than it is when you see events in the distant universe through a telescope.

Presentness would make no difference

A quite different argument has been presented by a wide variety of philosophers.<sup>28</sup> The argument is roughly that if a property is visible, then there must be some way of distinguishing the presence of this property from its absence in perceptual content. But the only candidate for perceiving tensed properties is presentness, so either all perceived events are perceived as present or none is. But if all events were perceived as present, then we could not perceive any event that was not perceived as present. So no event is perceived as present. Here is a representative passage from Scott Hestevold:

Finally, phenomenal properties serve as a means of distinguishing some experiences from others. For example, being red is the property which allows me to distinguish one part of my visual field from, say, another part which is blue. (Alternatively, being appeared to redly allows me to discriminate this way of being appeared to from being appeared to bluey.) Being present, however, serves no such discriminatory function. Since all of my (present) experiences are present, the property of being present does not allow me to distinguish certain of my present experiences from other present experiences.<sup>29</sup>

Hestevold's argument might actually be directed against the idea that experiences could be given as tensed. But the argument could easily be generalised to perceivable events.

This argument can be deflected by pointing out that on my account some parts of perceptual content are actually experienced as past. And the temporal parts of the perceived process presented by those parts are similarly presented as lying in the past. So it is quite simply not true that we only perceive events as present. We can perceive them as past as well.

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<sup>28</sup> Craig Callender, "The Common Now", *Philosophical Issues*, XVIII, 1 (September 2008): 339-361; Scott Hestevold, "Passage and the Presence of Experience", *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, L, 1 (March 1990): 537-552; Le Poidevin, *Images of Time*; Bradford Skow, "Experience and the Passage of Time", *Philosophical Perspectives*, XXV, 1 (December 2011):359-387.

<sup>29</sup> Hestevold, "Passage and the Presence of Experience", p. 542f.

Tensed properties are causally inert

The third and final counterargument that I wish to discuss has been elaborated by in particular Simon Prosser.<sup>30</sup> A crucial feature of Prosser's argument is that the passage of time could not causally influence events. If there were tensed properties, they would consequently lack causal efficacy. Hence, they would not be able to causally influence perceptual states. So far I agree with Prosser.

Prosser believes that the causal inefficacy of tensed properties rules out tensed content. The argument is roughly that if a feature of perceptual content is about a certain feature in the surrounding environment, then the feature of content must reliably track the feature of the environment: "An experience *tracks* the phenomenon it represents, and it does so uniquely."<sup>31</sup> But this requires that the environmental feature reliably causes the feature of content. Here is Prosser:

[I]n order for an experience to be *of* something, the experienced feature of the world had better have a role in determining the phenomenology of the experience; otherwise, as I urged above, there would be nothing to make one phenomenal feature the experience of temporal passage rather than another. Moreover, experiential reports are events and are presumably caused by the experiences to which they refer.<sup>32</sup>

So according to Prosser, tensed properties do not causally influence perceptual experiences.

Hence, the latter cannot be about the former.

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<sup>30</sup> Prosser, "Could We Experience the Passage of Time". See also Skow "Experience and the Passage of Time".

<sup>31</sup> Prosser, "Could We Experience the Passage of Time", p. 86.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, p. 89.

Now, I do not believe that Prosser is right in claiming that features of perceptual content must reliably track features in the world in order for them to intend these features, but for the sake of argument I am willing to grant Prosser that much in the present context. I would however deny the assumption that in order for a feature of content to track a feature in the world, the latter must be able to cause the former. Indeed, perceptual content consists of several non-temporal features which seems to reliably track features of the world, without the latter causing the former.

Consider for example the case of relations. Let us assume that we can perceive relations such as *larger than*, *similar to* and *longer than*. These kinds of relations presumably lack causal efficacy. The relation *being longer than* does not seem to cause anything. These relations are existentially dependent upon their relata. But they lack causal efficacy. So the fact that we see two objects as exactly resembling each other is not due to the relationship that obtains between them. So in this case, relations of resemblance are reliably tracked by “relational features” of perceptual content, but the former does not in any way cause the latter.

A similar argument can easily be devised about tensed content. When we veridically perceive “do-re-mi”, we first perceive “do”, then “re” and subsequently “mi”. Parts of the perceptions presenting “do” and “re” linger on in consciousness when we perceive “mi”, even though in an altered form. These alterations results in us perceiving “do” and “re” as past when we perceive “mi” as present. This occurs even though these features of content are not directly caused by tensed properties.

If events really are tensed, the above story can easily explain how perceptual content can track tensed properties without being caused by the latter. If, on the other hand, there are no tensed properties and the B-theory of time is correct, there is an alternative solution. On our alternative construal tensed content functions just as any other indexical content. It is irreducible to tenseless content, yet it can have tenseless truth conditions. Tensed content is

constitutive of a function which takes as its value the context of the act of perception and yields certain conditions of veridicality for that particular act of perception. These conditions of veridicality are consequently tenseless. On such an alternative account it is true that in some sense tensed content does not track tensed properties. But that is true of all kinds of indexical content. And a theory of perceptual content which does not allow for indexical content does not seem to be very promising.

## 5 Conclusions

I have argued that given some in my opinion reasonable assumptions regarding the nature of perception, it follows that perceptual content is tensed. It is tensed both in the sense that perceptions are experienced as either present or past and in the sense that events and processes are perceived as either present or past.

Now, it might well be that the perception of passage has played an important role in supporting A-theories of time. But we should be careful not to attribute too much significance to tensed content when justifying ontological theories regarding the nature of time. I have argued that B-theorists are wrong in rejecting the claim that we perceive events and processes as tensed and that we to the contrary can perceive events as present or past. But this does not necessarily mean that the object of perception really is tensed. The fact that perceptual content is tensed is consistent both with the notion that perceptions represent tensed events, and with the notion that perceptions represent tenseless events. If the latter is the case, tensed content

functions as normal indexical content. And tensed content is on a par with indexical spatial content.

Whereas perceptual content is tensed, perceptual phenomenology is neutral between the A-theory and the B-theory. It is phenomenologically indeterminate whether tensed content refers to tensed properties or functions as ordinary indexicals which take as their value tenseless properties. Consequently, the fact that perceptual content is tensed supports neither the A-theory nor the B-theory of time.