

Author's pre-publication version of a review in *Metascience*. The final publication is available at Springer via [10.1007/s11016-017-0176-z](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11016-017-0176-z). A full-text, view-only version is available through Springer's SharedIt Initiative: <http://rdcu.be/qfFt>

Do we really experience temporal passage?

Review of Simon Prosser's *Experiencing time*.

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In *Experiencing Time*, Simon Prosser takes critical stock of the issue of what our experience of time is like, and what it tells us about the metaphysics of time. He makes it clear that he is not neutral on the issue. He wants to challenge the popular assumption that experience supports the A-theory of time; the view that time, somehow, passes from future to present and into the past. Prosser argues that we do not experience temporal passage, and that this removes the *only* plausible reason there ever was for believing in the A-theory. Furthermore, he argues that the B-theory of time can explain why time *appears* to be in some ways dynamic even though in reality it is static, which removes an important objection to the B-theory, the view that all times exist in parity standing in relations of earlier and later than to each other. Consequently, we have little reason to endorse the A-theory, and every reason to endorse the B-theory.

As you can tell, we are dealing with a strongly opinionated book. Indeed, as a presentist I find a lot to disagree with, and yet I thoroughly enjoy the challenge it poses. It is the most ambitious attempt I know of to explain how the B-theory of time can account for the dynamic features of experience. In my view, the book does a good job of presenting what the issue is, and introduces interesting new perspectives to it, but there remain serious question marks about the conclusion that we have no reason to believe the A-theory. It is a book that is sure to stimulate discussion on the subject, which makes it all the more interesting.

The book begins with an introduction to the metaphysics of time (Ch. 1), but then moves immediately on to present the key argument, the so-called *detector argument* (Ch. 2). The argument (which comes in two versions) is meant to show that there cannot possibly be any kind of physical system that can detect temporal passage, wherefore the human mind cannot either. If the mind cannot experience passage, and the experience of passage is the main argument in favour of the A-theory, then the A-theory loses its *raison d'être*.

I am myself in two minds about the soundness of the detector argument, but have independent reasons to accept that experience contains no *sui generis* feature of 'temporal passage', i.e. no special phenomenal feature of passage that is distinct from our experiences of physical and/or mental occurrences (Ingthorsson 2013). However, like Prosser himself recognises, the latter kind of experiences appear dynamic; things appear to endure through changes in intrinsic properties and movement, we experience ourselves as enduring through our own experiences, causes appear to bring their effects into existence, and we appear to think as opposed to experience a succession of thoughts.

To my mind, the issue isn't whether experience directly supports the A- or B-theory—only naïve realists would argue that—but (a) whether dynamic experiences can arise in B-time, and (b) which theory best makes sense of change, persistence, and causation, as well as of a plethora of more concrete phenomena such as thinking, willing, acting, creating, reacting, etc. If this is right, then the detector argument is not enough to push the A-theory off the table, and yet Prosser continues his discussion on the assumption that the A-theory has been falsified, except when he attempts to refute it again over the issue of endurance (see below).

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Prosser now moves on to explain how the B-theory can account for various dynamic aspects of experience, for instance why we are inclined to think of some events as future, others as present, and the rest as past (Ch. 3), why events appear to take place at certain rates and have duration (Ch. 4). B-theorists typically approach these questions by providing B-theoretic truth-conditions for token *expressions* about tense, rates, and duration. Prosser's approach is refreshingly novel, in that not only addresses semantic questions of this kind but also various kinds of non-conceptual relations that a subject can have to its spatiotemporal environment, such as causal relations. Prosser talks about *Subject-Environment Functional Relations* (SEF relations).

Interestingly, I can agree with much of what Prosser argues here, even though in my mind it fits better within an A-theoretic framework. Yes, surely, SEF relations explain the dynamic character of experience. But here's the rub. Do these explanations really work on the assumption that the B-theory is true? Don't they require that things really endure, that causes produce their effects, and that we can make choices and initiate actions on the basis of them? Indeed, Prosser illustrates SEF relations with various examples of dynamic changes that are usually understood in terms of changes involving enduring particulars. For instance, Starlings flying close in large groups and which must therefore react very quickly to changes in the movement of each other (p. 85). If the persistence of these Starlings over time consists in a succession of temporal parts existing (tenselessly) at various spatiotemporal positions, then arguably all we have is the illusion of quick reflexes and avoidance of collisions when there really is just a (tenselessly) existing pattern of temporal parts.

Chapter 5 deals with the question of whether experience is temporally extended. The discussion doesn't bear too much on the issue of whether an A- or B-theory is correct. It just gives a well-stated and thoroughly critical overview of the issue, which is one that revolves a lot around interpretations of various empirical findings about perception. Prosser's conclusion is that the issue is as yet unsettled, and will have to await further development in the empirical research on temporal experience. I agree.

Chapter 6 addresses the issue of why change appears dynamic in experience, and it is suggested that it appears so because experience presents things as enduring rather than perduring, and not because we perceive some particular phenomenal quality of passage. I agree. However, Prosser thinks the B-theory is incompatible with enduring entities, and attempts to show—appealing to David Lewis' *problem of temporary intrinsics* (1986: Ch. 4.2.)—that our experience of endurance through change involves a contradiction and therefore must be mistaken. The argument is that if an object *O* endures through time and has the intrinsic property *F* at one time but $\neg F$ at another time, then *O* is both *F* and $\neg F$.

Unfortunately, Prosser seems to be unaware of my critical discussion of the problem of temporary intrinsics (Ingthorsson 2001, 2009, and 2016: 96ff), and which, if valid, thwarts Prosser's conclusion. I argue that the argument only delivers the contradiction that *O* is *F* and $\neg F$, if it is assumed that *O* being *F* and *O* being $\neg F$ are equally existent states of affairs, i.e. if it is assumed that the B-theory is true; only then is it impossible for *O* to be the common constituent of both equally. According to the A-theory, *O* can first be *F* and then cease to be *F* as it becomes $\neg F$. Indeed, Lewis admits that presentism, a version of the A-theory, escapes the problem because it denies that the future and past exist, but he ignores that option because he can't take presentism seriously as a doctrine. Prosser does not take this complication into account.

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The final chapter is on the one hand a summary of the explanation as to why time appears to pass in experience when it really doesn't (sections 7.1. and 7.6.), and on the other a discussion of the standard problems with the B-theory; is it compatible with the future being open and our conviction that we have a free will (sect. 7.2–5). Free will is not my area of expertise, but my guess is that the experts will want to ask whether Prosser explains how free will is actually possible in B-time, or only how the illusion of free will can arise.

In conclusion, it may well be true that experience does not contain a *sui generis* feature of temporal passage, and something like SEF relations may figure in the explanation of why experience appears dynamic. However, I don't think this shows whether the A- or B-theory is true. Indeed, this book may not turn out to settle any scores, but I anticipate that it will shift the focus of the discussion about how experience figures in settling the dispute between the A and B-theories, and very definitely it adds considerable complexity and depth to the discussion. Most importantly, *Experiencing Time* provides one of the few systematic B-theoretic attempts to explain the dynamic features of experience, and should therefore become a natural target for friends of the A-theory. I thoroughly recommend it.

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