

The Character of Temporal Experience

8-11 June 2022

University of Geneva

Bâtiment des philosophes, PHIL211

Time seems to be a pervasive component of our experience of reality. We see the things around us changing over time or persisting unchanged. We hear sounds succeeding one another, with varying duration and frequency. We think of events as present, past, or future and, depending on how we think of them, we find different emotional reactions appropriate, and different courses of action fitting. This conference aims to investigate the character of our experience of time, broadly construed to include any time-sensitive or time-directed aspect of perception, thinking, agency, and emotions. Relevant questions include, but are not limited to, the following:

- How do we perceive events in time? Is there some kind of correspondence between the temporal structure of an experience and that of its representational content?
- Is perceptual experience temporally perspectival? Does it 'privilege' the present over the past and the future? Does it involve a phenomenology of 'flow' or 'passage'?
- Is empirical thinking essentially involved with 'tensed' contents? Are 'tensed' contents indispensable to the explanation and rationalization of timely action?
- Is there an inherently rational way for our emotions to evolve through time? What conception of time is implicit in, or presupposed by, time-directed emotions such as hope, regret, or relief?

The conference is part of the SNSF funded project 'The Privileged Present: from Phenomenology to Metaphysics' (Project number: PZ00P1_186148).

Speakers:

Holly Andersen (Simon Fraser University)

Natalja Deng (Yonsei University)

Yuval Dolev (Bar-Ilan University)

Kerem Eroglu (Central European University)

Christoph Hoerl (University of Warwick),

Daniel Kim (University of York)

Berislav Marušić (University of Edinburgh)

Giovanni Merlo (University of Geneva),

Simon Prosser (University of St. Andrews)

Thomas Sattig (Universität Tübingen)

Matthew Soteriou (King's College London)

Giuliano Torrengo (University of Milan / Autonomous University of Barcelona)

Michael Traynor (independent)

Keith Wilson (University of Oslo)

Organizing committee: Christoph Hoerl, Giovanni Merlo, Fabrice Teroni, Giuliano Torrengo

PhilEvents webpage: <https://philevents.org/event/show/97006>

Schedule

Wednesday June 8th

14:45: Registration at Bâtiment des philosophes (Bd des Philosophes 22)

15-16h30: Matthew Soteriou, “Experiencing the present and the passage of time”

16h45-18h15: Kerem Eroglu, “Experiential temporality and the unique temporal signature of experience”

20: Dinner at *Il Carosello* (Bd Georges-Favon 25)

Thursday June 9th

9-10h30: Berislav Marušić, “On the temporality of grief”

10h45-12.15: Giovanni Merlo, “Psychological eternalism and the sense of ‘now’”

12h30: Lunch at UniDufour cafeteria (Rue du Général-Dufour 24)

14h30-16: Yuval Dolev, “Understanding the open future”

16h15-17h45: Natalja Deng, “An experience-based interpretation of the A versus B distinction”

Friday June 10th

9-10h30: Christoph Hoerl, “James, Husserl and the specious present”

10h45-12.15: Daniel Kim, “Perceiving time on the horizon”

12h30: Lunch at UniDufour cafeteria (Rue du Général-Dufour 24)

14h30-16: Holly K. Andersen, “Mathematizing temporal experience”

16h15-17h45: Thomas Sattig, “A geometrical account of experiential passage”

20: Conference dinner at *Les Armures* (Rue du Soleil-Levant)

Sunday June 11th

9h30-11: Simon Prosser, “Rates and durations relativised”

11h15-12h45: Keith Wilson, “The problem of temporal grain: experiencing time across the senses”

13: Lunch at *Kiosque des Bastions* (Promenade des Bastions 1)

14h30-16: Giuliano Torrenco, “The narrative present and the passage of time”

16h15-17h45: Michael Traynor, “Just one thing after another: the arrow of time as integral to temporal experience”

Abstracts

(In alphabetical order, by author)

Mathematizing Temporal Experience

Holly K. Andersen (Simon Fraser)

How could the distinctively temporal features of experience be accurately represented using resources in mathematics, and what would it look like to get such a mathematical representation right or wrong? I start by considering the Integrated Information Theory of Consciousness (Tononi et. al.; IITC henceforth) as a new approach to representing experience. There are many serious issues with IITC as a specific account of consciousness, and it seems to have recently turned into an account of causation instead of consciousness. But even if we reject the specific IITC, the proposal has opened a certain kind of inquiry: how could experience be represented in a more abstract mathematical way, without recourse to mathematical representations of specifically brain-related structures? Could a mathematical account of experience have a well-defined representation of the temporal properties of experience, without having to import further constraints about the physical structure of the experiencer? I examine this from two directions. One direction begins with mathematical techniques and then attempts to use these as a framework to model experience, in particular, the persisting temporal structure of the present moment in experience. The second direction starts from temporal experience, using it as a constraint on adequacy of mathematical representations that they must return at least some of the distinctive temporal features of consciousness in a non-arbitrary way, as part of the mathematical framework and not as an additional imposed assumption. The example I will use of such a constraint will be a weak one: that the present in experience not be temporally punctate. I give an overview of several major avenues that could be used as a basis for such a mathematical model, including two forms of information theory (discrete and continuous) from IITC. I show that a standard form of information theory, with discrete time steps, will inevitably fall prey to the same problem that Locke encountered when trying to derive the idea of succession from the succession of ideas. It will turn out that it is surprisingly hard, for interesting reasons, to find mathematical representational tools that non-trivially involve time variable(s) to represent a non-punctate present.

An experience-based interpretation of the A versus B distinction

Natalja Deng (Yonsei)

I start by suggesting that the official, ‘Narrowscope’ version of the B-theory, which is a positive view on which time’s nature is such that it does not pass, should be distinguished from a Widescope B view, which merely rejects the A-theory without making any positive claims about the nature of time. I then consider the relation between A versus (Narrowscope) B and temporal experience, partially defending two claims made by Simon Prosser. This leads me to an (anti)realist interpretation of A versus (Narrowscope) B. On that interpretation, the meaning of ‘(an absence of) passage’ is defined partly through an appeal to experience: the A-theory is a view that posits a process partly defined through an appeal to experience, and the (Narrowscope) B-theory is a view that says this process doesn’t exist. Experiences are by definition as of passage. I then address the problem that views on which we do not experience time as passing are more and more commonly defended. I argue that what looks like a B-theoretic view on which experience is B-theoretic (‘deflationism’/‘veridicalism’) is actually based on the Widescope reading and thus makes only a minimal claim about temporal experience: it is not the case that we experience time as passing. I

defend this claim through a close examination of Torrenço's 'origin problem' and Hoerl's 'intelligibility problem'. The upshot is that the most plausible understanding deflationism actually provides some support for the (anti)realist interpretation of A versus (Narrowscope) B.

Understanding the open future

Yuval Dolev (Bar-Ilan)

I argue that recent attempts to introduce the open future into physics and math do not succeed because our notion of the open future is grounded in aspects of experience that cannot be formalized or mathematicised. More specifically, the experiences which acquaint us with the future's openness are those involving deliberation and choice. Even the indeterminacy encountered in coinflips or quantum measurements is traceable back to the openness we encounter in experiences of making a choice. This fact, I claim, does not detract one iota from the objectivity of the open future, which, indeed, must figure in any description of the fundamental structure of reality.

Experiential Temporality and the Unique Temporal Signature of Experience

Kerem Eroglu (Central European University)

There is a recent controversy about how to best characterize the temporal phenomenology of perceptual experience. Matthew Soteriou (2013) and Ian Phillips (2014) think, on the one hand, that the subject can introspectively attend to the temporal location of the temporal experience itself by attending to the temporal location of the experienced non-instantaneous event. On the other hand, Christopher Hoerl (2018) thinks that the best characterization of temporal phenomenology rules out any introspective awareness of the temporal features of the experience. One might think that the dispute boils down to a 'phenomenological stalemate' that is not likely to be resolved (Carter 2018). In this talk, I suggest that there is an alternative characterization of perceptual phenomenology that overcomes the tension. I argue that once we understand properly the distinction between two phenomenological claims 1) the temporal experience claim that perceptual experience presents temporal properties, and 2) the experiential temporality claim that the experience unfolds over time, we have reason to think that the subject's point of view in conscious perception has a unique temporal location and orientation that contributes to the what it's likeness to have that perceptual experience.

James, Husserl and the Specious Present

Christoph Hoerl (Warwick)

William James and Edmund Husserl are two key figures in the literature on the nature of temporal experience. Yet, as I will suggest, there is a deep tension in their respective writings on the subject. In each case, I will argue, this is due to the fact that they do not distinguish clearly enough between two quite different aspects of temporal experience. Once those two aspects are clearly distinguished from one another, though, their writings offer interesting suggestions on each of them.

Perceiving time on the horizon

Daniel Kim (York)

This paper offers a positive account of the phenomenology of temporal experience, arguing that it is not solely determined by the temporal objects (and properties) perceived, but also by the temporal 'structure' of the experience itself. This is contrasted with Hoerl's (2018) strong temporal

externalism, the view that the phenomenology of temporal experience is fully determined by the temporal objects perceived ‘in absence of temporal viewpoint’. However, I argue that Hoerl’s externalist view, understood within a ‘naïve realist’ framework, cannot do full justice to the contribution made by the subject to the phenomenology of temporal experience because of the emphasis on the role assigned to mind-independent events. The issue concerns the difficulty of accounting for variations in the phenomenology of temporal experience without the variation in the objects. I argue that Hoerl’s externalist view is not well-positioned to explain the discrepancy between ‘expected’ and ‘felt’ duration of perceived events (e.g., the same events can seem to take ‘longer-than-expected’ when bored and ‘shorter-than-expected’ when having fun). My alternative approach is to supplement temporal externalism with the phenomenological notion of ‘horizon’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2013), to legitimise the subjective (perspectival) aspects of the phenomenology of temporal experience. The idea is that perceptual experience involves a forward-facing ‘future-horizon’ in virtue of which one can be aware of anticipated experiences one could have. I argue that the proposed view is better suited (than Hoerl’s) to explain phenomenal variations without the variation in the acquainted events, in terms of variations in the ‘future-horizon’ (i.e., the subject’s anticipation).

On the Temporality of Grief

Berislav Marušić (Edinburgh)

Suppose we suffer a loss, such as the death of a loved one. In light of her death, we will typically feel grief, as it seems we should. After all, our loved one’s death is a reason for grief. Yet with the passage of time, our grief will typically diminish, and this seems somehow all right. However, our reason for grief remains the same, since the passage of time does not undo the death of our loved one. How, then, could it not be wrong for grief to diminish? I argue that the puzzle of diminishing is recalcitrant, because its source lies in a structural feature of consciousness: Since grief is not about us, our apprehension of its temporal structure is at odds with our apprehension of the object of grief, i.e. the beloved who died. This gives rise to irreconcilable double-vision. Nonetheless, the diminution of grief can be reasonable. However, we can only understand this from a theoretical standpoint on ourselves. From such a standpoint, we can understand that, given the embodied nature of grief, it is *all right* that we should accommodate ourselves to loss. Yet we cannot point to the reasons in light of which this would be all right. Reflection on the temporality of grief must leave us unreconciled.

Psychological eternalism and the sense of ‘now’

Giovanni Merlo (Geneva)

Psychological eternalism is the view that all psychological contents are eternally true, if true at all. A familiar challenge for psychological eternalists is that of explaining how psychological attitudes directed at ‘eternal’ contents can rationalize timely action. For example, how can any belief directed at an ‘eternal’ content – a belief that I could correctly hold *at any time* – rationalize my action of ducking to avoid being hit by a ball – an action that it is only rational for me to perform *at a specific time*? Many psychological eternalists think that this challenge can be met by appealing to indexical ways of thinking about eternal matters – most notably, the indexical way of thinking we ordinarily express using ‘now’. I will argue that, for this kind of response to carry conviction, psychological eternalists need to provide an account of how the indexical way of thinking associated with, e.g., ‘now’ can – together with the rest of the agent’s beliefs, desires, intentions, etc. – motivate him or her to act in a certain way. I will then explore some possible attempts to provide such an account and explain why I think they fail.

Rates and Durations Relativised

Simon Prosser (St Andrews)

It seems plausible that different creatures might experience rates and durations differently. To a creature whose internal processes function at half the rate, external processes may seem, subjectively, to happen twice as fast, and to take half as long. This raises questions about the contents of temporal thoughts and experiences. In previous work (Prosser 2016), I suggested that the relevant contents concerned rates and durations *relative to the subject*. But, although I still think this is broadly correct, problems arise for the particular version of the view that I defended (some of which also affect a broadly similar proposal made by Ian Phillips 2012, 2013). I shall argue here that the problems are easily solved once one abandons the view that there is a categorical phenomenology for experienced temporal properties. Strictly speaking, there is no such thing as *how quickly something seems to happen*, or *how long it seems to take*, simpliciter. I suggest an explanation for our tendency to think otherwise.

A Geometrical Account of Experiential Passage

Thomas Sattig (Tübingen)

What is the nature of the sense of temporal passage in human experience? My aim is to develop a geometrical account of experiential passage. The account is guided by the hypothesis that experiential passage has its source in the geometrical structure of experiential time. What is the geometrical structure of experiential time? On the assumption that experiential space is a system of location, it will be suggested that experiential time is not a system of location. The notion of geometrical relativization will be introduced, and experiential time will be conceived of as a system of geometrical relativization. Experiential passage will then be explained in terms of properties of a system of geometrical relativization.

Experiencing the present and the passage of time

Matthew Soteriou (King's College London)

In this talk I will outline a view according to which (a) the experienced present is best understood as the origin of the sort of temporal point of view that we occupy when we are conscious and (b) our experience of the passage of time is best understood as experience of apparent change in location of the origin of that temporal point of view. I shall introduce the relevant notion of a temporal point of view by comparing it with the notion of a perceptual point of view, indicate how this way of thinking of the experienced present bears on debates about the so-called 'doctrine of the specious present', discuss some of the ways in which the phenomenology of our experience of the passage of time bears on and complicates these debates about the experienced present, and discuss how aspects of the phenomenology can help diagnose some sources of resistance to the idea that the experienced present is an interval.

The narrative present and the passage of time

Giuliano Torrenzo (Milan / Autonomous University of Barcelona)

The question where our naïve idea of time comes from is one that has interested philosophers at least since Locke. A recent tradition of empirically informed replies to this very question is forming in recent years. Although the various proposals differ from one another, they converge on not giving to information encoded in the content of perception much explanatory weight. I am, in part, in line with this tradition. In this talk, I will tackle two aspects of our pre theoretical understanding

of temporal reality: presentness and passage. I will discuss several “deflationist” strategies with respect to the idea that our phenomenology suggests both of them, and tentatively argue for a hybrid approach, according to which although our idea of the present has no phenomenal ground, passage is a structural feature of our phenomenal life.

Just one thing after another: The arrow of time as integral to temporal experience

Michael Traynor

This paper addresses a little-discussed question: What would it look like, if it looked like time did not move forward? In order to address this question, I attempt to make sense of the notions of experience as of time reversal, and experience as of a total freeze of time. Looking at different potential ways of characterizing such experiences, I suggest that, in both cases, time only appears to be doing anything other than moving forwards when the focus on events (or lack thereof) is not accompanied by any recognition of the character of temporal experience itself. I then explore some consequences of this for the question of whether experience as of the forward movement of time is illusory.

The Problem of Temporal Grain: Experiencing Time Across the Senses

Keith Wilson (Oslo)

Perceptual experience, unlike remembering or imagining, is characteristically an experience of how things are ‘now’ in the present. However, each sensory modality—vision, hearing, touch, etc.—operates on a slightly different timescale, with differing transmission times, processing lag, and temporal resolution. The existence of distinct periodicities in reaction times and inter-sensory binding suggests that perceptual processing is not uniform or continuous, but divided into a series of discrete intervals, or temporal windows. Indeed, recent studies point to the existence of a range of such windows with differing temporal and functional characteristics, creating a temporal hierarchy. A satisfactory view of temporal experience must accommodate the existence of such ‘temporal grain’, creating a prima facie problem for views which assume that perceptual or other types of experience are uniform and arbitrarily divisible over time. In this paper I examine the implications of this granular structure for intentionalist and extensionalist views of temporal experience, concluding that both require revision in order to accommodate the temporal structure of experience across multiple sensory modalities.