

The Development of the 'Specious Present' and James' Views on Temporal Experienceⁱ

Holly Andersen
Simon Fraser University
holly_andersen@sfu.ca

1. Introduction

The term “specious present” was introduced to philosophy and psychology by William James, in his influential *Principles of Psychology* (1890). The specious present doctrine, as it is often referred to, is the view that we experience the present moment as nonpunctate, as having some short but nonzero duration. It can be illustrated by comparing our experience of the ‘now’ or present moment with the way the present is represented on a timeline. Mathematically or physically, the present can be represented by a single point on a timeline separating past from future, moving along the line from the past towards the future. Such a present moment has no duration. In contrast, the temporal character of our experience at least *prima facie* seems to span some duration, one that might range from as short as several hundred milliseconds to, as James thought, as long as 12 seconds or more.

Perception of motion is frequently offered as a justification for the specious present doctrine. Motion requires some nonzero amount of time in which to take place. We perceive many kinds of motion *as motion*, rather than perceiving static successive locations of objects and inferring motion from them. Perceptual differences with different rates of motion highlight the temporal span of experience. Motion that is extremely fast, for instance, may not appear as motion at all. We see movies as continuous, even though they are comprised of changing static images; we see overly fast motion as simply a blur or a line. At the other end of the range, motion that is extremely slow doesn't perceptually appear to be motion at all. The movement of the hour hand of a clock is not perceptible by simply looking at it. In order to notice that it has moved, we have to compare its current position to a previous position that we remember rather than perceive. Within a certain range of

rate of change, though, we perceive motion *as* motion, rather than inferring that motion has taken place. This must mean, the reasoning goes, that our experience of time was sufficiently extended as to include a portion of that movement.

The way in which the specious present is described can sound self-contradictory. It involves attributing to the experience at a given moment of consciousness contents that must span some non-zero interval of physical time. It can be understood to take experience to be punctate and simply include nonpunctate contents; more realistically, though, it takes experience to both include nonpunctate content and to do so in a way that is both spread over some range of time and yet still 'present' in some sense of the word. And even though the idea is that we perceive these contents at the same time, punctate or not, we do not perceive them as simultaneous. Wilfrid Sellars called this "an incoherent combination of literal simultaneity and literal successiveness" (1982, 232).

Whether or not the specious present doctrine ultimately turns out to be self-contradictory, it raises a variety of intriguing challenges and questions for our understanding of time itself, of temporal awareness specifically, for consciousness in general, and for the connection between experience and the physical processes that give rise to them. Do we really experience the present as temporally extended, or are first person reports to this effect somehow misguided or false? Is the discrepancy between experienced and represented time merely apparent, or are they genuinely in conflict? What implications does this discrepancy have for our epistemic positions with respect to time itself, or for finding the physical processes underpinning temporal experience? Many of these questions come down to what may be the primary overarching questions on which the specious present doctrine bears: the temporal extent of the *content* of consciousness, the temporal extent of *acts* of consciousness, and how these two temporal extents compare with one another.

James' introduction of the specious present doctrine spawned a wide range of philosophical and scientific discussions, some of which endorse the nonpunctate nature of temporal experience, some of which problematize it, and some of which take it for granted and apply it (see, *inter alia*, Broad 1923; Le Poivedin 1999;

Dainton 2001; Grush 2003; Kelly 2005; Oaklander 2002). There is an already-strong and growing trend to attempt to ground Husserlian phenomenology of time consciousness in various aspects of cognitive science (see, *inter alia*, Gallagher 1997; Varela 1999; Lutz and Thompson 2003; Grush 2006). Even Husserl's phenomenological analysis was stimulated by his reading of James on this point. It is hard to overestimate the relevance of the specious present doctrine in philosophy of time and temporal consciousness.

This doctrine has roots stretching far back into British empiricism. The historical development of the specious present doctrine is rich ground to mine in order to answer, or reframe, questions about the nature of our temporal experience and the constraints it places on the kind of physical processes that could ground it. The problems with which philosophers struggled, and that gave rise to different views on what the experienced present moment might be, are reflected in the contemporary debate. There are multiple distinct ways in which one could cash out what precisely a 'thick present' looks like in this history, with different implications for both our experience of the present specifically, and for conscious experience more broadly. This means that the history of thinking on temporal experience is not only (as it turns out) interesting in its own right, it can also enrich contemporary investigations on these points.

2. Four themes regarding temporal experience

There are several recurring themes as we trace distinct lines of influence on James' development of the specious present doctrine (which are also, not coincidentally, important influences on the development of Husserl's phenomenology of inner time consciousness). In what follows, I will trace out these lines of influence, highlighting the evolution of four themes through a number of different thinkers. These themes are closely interconnected, but each highlights a distinct facet or element of a philosophical position such that the position bears on the question of the temporal extent of the experienced present.

The first theme is a distinction between a strict or philosophical versus a 'vulgar' or popular conception of the present. In the strict or philosophical sense, the present moment is punctate, even though it may not appear to be so. If one were to advocate a strict notion of the present in experience, one would need to then explain why our experience of it is illusory, since it phenomenologically seems to encompass at least some short duration (see theme 3 below for an example of such an explanation). The 'vulgar' conception of the present, so named because it is utilized by those not immersed in philosophical thinking, applies the term 'present' to an extended period of time. Sometimes this is a very extended period of time, such as the present year or present era, and sometimes it refers to a shorter period that is specifically understood to be perceptual in character.

The second theme concerns the division of labor between perception and memory. For philosophers such as Reid, the present moment, in experience and out of it, must be punctate, and anything else that might mistakenly be ascribed to the present moment in experience must actually be the work of memory. This is because Reid, and others like Stewart who follow him in this regard, are committed to views about consciousness that are incompatible with experience genuinely encompassing a nonzero duration. Where precisely a given philosopher draws the line between perception and memory is a function of the theory of consciousness being advocated; allowing for a nonzero duration to the present moment in experience places restrictions on the kinds of theories of consciousness one can endorse. Claiming that we only perceive the strict present forced Stewart, for instance, to rely on attention as a supplement to perception. As such, we can learn a great deal about theories of consciousness from claims about where perception ends and memory begins.

The third theme is the question of whether temporal experience should be treated as some kind of faculty for sensing a peculiar sort of object. Consciousness includes, for many authors to be discussed here, a faculty for perceiving objects in the world, where those faculties deliver their objects imperfectly. In vision, for instance, we have limited spatial resolution with the naked eye, and must rely on enhancing devices such as microscopes to make spatial discriminations beyond a

certain range. Analogously, the present moment in experience is understood by some to 'really' be punctate, and only appear somewhat extended because our time sense has a limited resolution capacity. If we had a time sense aid, like a temporal microscope, we could discriminate indefinitely smaller units of time.

The fourth and final theme is closely connected to each of the previous three. Those pre-James authors who most clearly espouse something akin to the specious present doctrine do so as a consequence of endorsing a particular idea about consciousness: namely, that to be conscious at all requires some kind of change or contrast. One could take such contrast to be sufficiently provided by simultaneous awareness of two different objects; in that case, there are no temporal requirements on consciousness. However, the common view on this is that the contrast or change should be between states of consciousness: a change between one note and another note in a song, for instance. Anytime we are aware of a change, it is *from* one perception *to* another. If such a successive contrast or change is required to be conscious of anything at all, then there is a temporal requirement on consciousness – it must span at least two such moments in order for a change to be noticeable.

3. James and his red herring

James dedicates an entire chapter in *Principles of Psychology* (1890) to “The Perception of Time.” In this chapter, he presents an array of phenomena that are part of the character of temporal experience to be investigated by and accounted for in psychology. He offers several arguments to the effect that consciousness must span a period of time, each of which continues at least one of the four themes presented earlier. The first such argument is that consciousness would shrink to a tiny point, and leave too much “in total darkness” (ibid., 606), if it did not have some temporal depth. James describes the strict present, a point with no extension, as only an ideal, in the way that a perfectly round circle would be an ideal. We conclude it exists only because we think it must, not because we ever actually experience it.

Instead of being conscious of or in a single instant of time, James says, we experience a wider expanse of time as present.

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. (1890, 609)

The specious present is introduced as a description of the actually experienced (as opposed to idealized and abstract) present. James quotes a long passage from an author he enigmatically and misleadingly refers to as E.R. Clay. The passage, in its entirety, is:

The relation of experience to time has not been profoundly studied. Its objects are given as being of the present, but the part of time referred to by the datum is a very different thing from the conterminous of the past and future which philosophy denotes by the name Present. The present to which the datum refers is really a part of the past – a recent past – delusively given as being a time that intervenes between the past and the future. Let it be named the specious present, and let the past, that is given as being the past, be known as the obvious past. All the notes of a bar of a song seem to the listener to be contained in the present. All the changes of place of a meteor seem to the beholder to be contained in the present. At the instant of the termination of such series, no part of the time measured by them seems to be a past. Time, then, considered relatively to human apprehension, consists of four parts, viz., the obvious past, the specious present, the real present, and the future. Omitting the specious present, it consists of three ... nonentities – the past, which does not exist, the future, which does not exist, and their conterminous, the present; the faculty from which it proceeds lies to us in the fiction of the specious present. (James 1890, 609; taken from [anonymous] 1882, 167-8)

This passage is the definitive presentation of the specious present doctrine, along with the earlier passage from James about the saddle of the present.

A point to note here, which will be followed up in a later section, is that James' presentation of the experienced present in this chapter is not accompanied by a description of what he takes experience in general to be like. In order to find how James conceives of experience, of which the experience of the present is one element (albeit a very important one), one has to look earlier in *Principles*. This is relevant because the description James provides of the specious doctrine in the chapter "Perception of Time" could potentially be understood in a number of incompatible ways if one were to only read that chapter. One might take James to be saying that experience itself comes in instantaneous elements, each including

content that spans a longer period of time than the act of consciousness itself. Or, one could understand him to say that both the content of experience, and the vehicle of experience itself, come in longer units than mere instants. In order to see how James advocates the latter rather than the former view, one needs to consider the other things James says about experience in *Principles*, especially concerning the stream of thought and consciousness of self.

Until quite recently, scholars writing about the specious present were forced to simply repeat James' citation for the author of the passage quoted in *Principles* (Meyers 1971; Plumer 1985; Pockett 2003; Dainton 2006). There were no records of an author matching the name 'E.R. Clay'. This effectively precluded research into the origin of this idea, or into the other things its original author might have said on the matter.

It turns out that there is no such person as 'E.R. Clay', and the book from which James took this passage was published anonymously. E. Robert Kelly was a cigar manufacturer in Boston who apparently retired early and had a strong amateur interest in philosophy. *The Alternative: A Study in Psychology* (1882) was his sole contribution to the field, and it bears the hallmarks of someone who was enthusiastic about philosophy but not widely read in it. Robert Kelly's son, Edmund Kelly, was a prominent Socialist around the turn of the century in the New England area. Edmund Kelly was friends with James, which is most likely the way James ended up with a copy of the book (Gilbert 1972).

Kelly's book was motivated, as he claims in his introductory chapters, by a concern that Positivism had somehow forced Common Sense philosophy to give up tenable positions only because these positions had not yet been sufficiently well-articulated. His aim was to provide a series of philosophical definitions of terms that would restore Common Sense to its rightful philosophical ground. Kelly's understanding of Common Sense philosophy, based on his own references, came primarily from Sir William Hamilton, of whom Kelly writes in awed tones.

While many of the definitions provided by Kelly are awkward, he does make several interesting points regarding temporal experience beyond the passage quoted by James. For instance, Kelly thinks that the specious present allows for our

experience of motion, and as a result, that we must draw a distinction between 'paradoxical' and 'anti-paradoxical' experience. Paradoxical experience occurs when the object of experience does not, or could not, exist as experienced. Any experience of temporally extended things as temporally extended – a trill of notes in a song, the flight of a bird, the trail of a meteor – is paradoxical, because such objects do not exist at any given moment of experience and by definition, movement requires time during which to occur. Yet we experience them both as occurring now, and as taking time. Therefore, Kelly concluded, the experience itself is paradoxical. Interestingly, once such paradoxical experience is completely past, it reverts to being anti-paradoxical experience, veridical experience of existent objects. We genuinely experienced the movement of genuinely moving things, but only once both movement and experience are no longer present; we cannot experience such things veridically as they occur.

James' mis-citation of Kelly's book, whether intended to preserve Kelly's anonymity or simply done by mistake, had the unfortunate consequence of obscuring the real sources from which James drew for his chapter "The Perception of Time." In the same section of the same chapter as the Kelly quote, James also cited Shadworth Hodgson, although the Hodgson passage is relegated to the footnotes. Hodgson, as we'll see shortly, made almost exactly the same point as Kelly regarding our experience of the present, and gave it a similar name – the 'empiric present.' The passage James cited in the body of the chapter contained an arguably more concise presentation of the doctrine, and motivated it with the contrast between the experienced and the mathematized present. It also had a somewhat catchier name. This placement does not, however, indicate much of interest regarding the development of the novel doctrine of the specious present. For that, we must look to Hodgson, and to the brand of empiricism known as Scottish Common Sense, where psychologically-oriented philosophers had already recognized the significance of temporal duration for consciousness.

4. Scottish Common Sense

The work of Kant and Hume on time and experience has been widely examined. It turns out, however, that there was a lively and ongoing discussion concerning experience and its temporal characteristics in the Scottish Common Sense tradition, from Thomas Reid, through Dugald Stewart and Thomas Brown, and up through Sir William Hamilton. James drew liberally from these psychologist-philosophers in writing *Principles*, as did both Kelly and Hodgson (see below), the two independent inventors of the doctrine of the specious present.

Locke (1690) argues that knowledge comes only from perception or reflection. He applied this formula in order to explain, among other things, how we arrive at our ideas of duration and succession. We come to our idea of duration by reflecting on our ideas which themselves have some duration; likewise, we come to our idea of succession by reflecting on the succession of ideas in our minds. In the context of a chapter on memory, Thomas Reid takes aim at Locke's account. He does not challenge the background view of knowledge as derived solely from perception and reflection, but rather challenges the path Locke charts from reflection to knowledge of duration and succession. Reid (1786) makes two points of interest to us here. The first concerns the feasibility of using the succession of ideas as a means of coming to understand duration. Reid poses a dilemma for Locke: either 1) the ideas that constitute the succession have duration themselves, or 2) they do not have duration. If they lack duration (2), then they can't constitute a succession – they would simply be simultaneous, lacking distance between them. If, on the other hand, they had duration (1) so as to constitute a succession, then a single idea would still have duration, even though it is not a succession. Either way, we could not reach the idea of duration from the succession of ideas.ⁱⁱ

The second point Reid raises is that Locke's account presupposes memory as a prerequisite for being capable of reflecting on ideas and their succession in our minds. We could not notice that our ideas succeeded one another in time unless we were able to remember a previous idea and compare it to a current, distinct, idea. This point is not a criticism of Locke per se, other than perhaps as a criticism for neglecting to mention that memory is also required in order to reach our ideas of succession and duration. But Reid's emphasis on this point touches on several of the

themes explicated in section 2. In order to reach knowledge of succession and duration via the succession and duration of ideas, consciousness itself must have certain characteristics that enable us to hold fast to multiple ideas separated in time from one another, and to compare these ideas to one another.

Reid's positing of memory as playing the role of holding onto an immediately prior idea in order to compare it to its successor is a consequence of how Reid divides up the roles that perception and memory can fill, another theme from section 2. Reid draws a distinction between the vulgar or crude, and strict or philosophical, ways of speaking about the present. This is one of the very first occasions on which the issue of the temporal span of experience is explicitly raised, although Reid's view is that the actual span of experience is zero.

... Philosophers and the vulgar differ in the meaning they put on upon what is called the *present* time, and are thereby led to make a different limit between sense and memory.

Philosophers give the name of the *present* to that indivisible point of time, which divides the future from the past: but the vulgar find it more convenient in the affairs of life, to give the name of present to a portion of time, which extends more or less, according to circumstances, into the past or the future. (1785, 348)

Thus, on Reid's account we cannot perceive succession at all – we can *perceive* a single instantaneous slice of a succession and *remember* the rest. This distinction between the crude or vulgar conception of the present and the strict or philosophical conception of the present starts with Reid but will change rather dramatically by the time it reaches James. In Reid's version of it, the vulgar usage of the present is not confined to anything that is necessarily *perceptual* in character – Reid mentions the vulgar referring to the present week or the present year. This distinction will subsequently become perceptual in character: the vulgar conception of the present will be the duration during which objects of perception appear to be present.

Reid acknowledges that it certainly seems to us as if we perceive successions directly. He accounts for this by analogy to vision and the *minimum visibile*. There is a smallest spatial size that we are capable of perceptually discerning as a result of

limited sensory abilities, even though there are in fact smaller spatial areas. Similarly, there is a smallest temporal duration we are capable of discerning, even though temporal durations themselves come in indefinitely smaller units. Our experience of the present moment is actually punctate, but we are unable to recognize this because we cannot discern sufficiently short temporal intervals.

This idea of the limited temporal resolution of perception, the third theme discussed in section 2, is taken up again by Dugald Stewart (1792). Stewart followed Reid in the Scottish Common Sense tradition and elaborated many of Reid's positions, responding to criticisms and potential problems that had arisen with respect to Reid's work. Stewart took the analogy with the *minimum visibile* even further than Reid had. Stewart described how we are capable of discerning spatial objects only down to a certain size. However, with the aid of a microscope, we can see that spatial discriminations can be made much more finely. If we had, he surmised, something like a temporal microscope, we would be able to discern indefinitely smaller temporal intervals (1792, 61). As such, the implication goes, there is nothing special or privileged about the features of experience that suggest a given temporal duration to the present moment – it is simply a function of how short-sighted we are, so to speak, with respect to time.

One of Stewart's most important contributions to the discussion regarding the temporal characteristics of experience is the way in which he reconciled certain aspects of experience with Reid's strict division between perception and memory. The problem is that both Reid and Stewart thought perception was capable of discerning only one object at a given instant. And yet, it seems that we are capable of immediately perceiving a great deal more than this. Stewart's example is that of perceiving a geometric figure. He thought we could only perceive a single point of the figure in any given instant. We seem, however, able to perceive the entire figure at a glance. On Reid's account, memory ought to be playing a key role in this phenomenon, but it appears that perception is doing the work.

Stewart added to Reid's account in two ways in order to address this problem. He introduced attention as a key faculty needed to bridge perception and memory, and he got some mileage out of the limited temporal resolution of

consciousness. Perception, he claims, can only take in a single object with each act. But, these acts of perception are quite short, much shorter than the smallest temporal duration we can discern. Furthermore, we do not remember everything we perceive. We only remember the content of perceptual acts to which we pay attention for a sufficient amount of time. The amount of time required to attend to ‘a perception’ in order to remember it is longer than the time it takes to perceive the object, but shorter than the shortest temporal duration we can notice. Thus, in what seems to us like a single instant, there are actually multiple distinct acts of perception, which are attended to in multiple distinct acts, such that we remember the perceptual contents of the attention-acts apparently simultaneously (1792, 53-54). It is an awkward theory, but it preserves the major features of Reid’s account of perception and memory while accommodating apparently conflicting features of experience.

Thomas Brown (1851) took issue with the way philosophers like Stewart ‘doubled’ consciousness, by separating acts of perception, memory, or attention from consciousness by making them *objects* of consciousness, while, Brown argued, they should be thought of as *constituting* consciousness. He also made two key steps along the road from Reid to James: the notion of ‘rapid retrospect’, a precursor to the specious present doctrine, and the idea that consciousness requires a contrast between two distinct sensations, theme 4 from section 2.

Brown failed to past some of the views developed by Reid, as a result of which he came up just short of giving the first full version of a specious present doctrine. He accepted Reid’s division of labor where perception could only be instantaneous while memory supplied the remainder. Brown responded to the apparent conflict between this view and experience in a subtler and arguably more satisfactory manner than Stewart did. He distinguished between the kind of memory that is clearly memory – with objects that are in the obvious past – and the kind of memory that does not seem like memory, whose objects are only just past. He calls this second kind of memory rapid retrospect.

When we think of feelings long past, it is impossible for us not to be aware that our mind is then truly retrospective ... But when the retrospect is of very

recent feelings – of feelings, perhaps, that existed as distinct states of the mind, the very moment before our retrospect began, the short interval is forgotten, and we think that that primary feeling, and our consideration of the feeling, are strictly simultaneous. ... When it is any thing more than the sensation, thought, or emotion, of which we are said to be conscious, it is a brief and rapid retrospect. (1851, 303)

This skirts very close to the specious present doctrine as presented by James, but it maintains the view that perception must be punctate. Brown argued that in order for a self to be conscious as a self, it must encompass at least two distinct sensations. He provides the example of an imaginary consciousness that was abruptly created fully formed, listening to a single tone on a flute. Such a creature would have no consciousness that it was a self – it would only know the tone. If this is succeeded by the fragrance of a rose, however, one could compare the previous and new sensations together, from which one would be conscious of oneself as spanning both of those sensations –conscious of the earlier one, and now conscious of the new one. This means that a condition necessary for the possibility of consciousness is content that spans more than a single instant, although Brown does not go so far as to say that consciousness itself spans more than a single instant. He places the implicitly temporal constraint on consciousness that it involve nonpunctate content even if perception itself occurs in a punctate instant.

The final philosopher to consider here is Sir William Hamilton. Hamilton expands on Brown's constraint that must consciousness involve contrast between distinct states, a view that had become widely accepted by then. Hamilton offered five "special conditions on consciousness," conditions that must be met in order to be conscious, two of which are relevant to this discussion. Hamilton's third condition simply is the point we just saw Brown make: consciousness requires some kind of change or contrast. If we were only to experience a single thing unchangingly, we would "be absolutely unconscious" (1861, 203). From this third condition Hamilton drew a corollary, which he made the fifth condition – memory.

When these two conditions are put together, Hamilton goes further than Brown by making explicit how the conditions for consciousness have a temporal dimension:

In the internal perception of a series of mental operations, a certain time, a certain duration, is necessary for the smallest section of continuous energy to which consciousness is competent. Some minimum of time must be admitted as the minimum of consciousness. (1861, 257)

Hamilton goes so far as to say that Duration is “a necessary condition of thought” (1856, 571). Here we have the culmination of an ongoing development in Scottish Common Sense philosophy, which clearly prefigures the specious present doctrine as James presents it.

James credited Reid, Stewart, Brown, Hamilton, and others with shaping psychology as a field in the pre-technical, pre-specialized “youth of our science,” and took *Principles* to be a step from their work toward an empirical, fully scientific, ‘English’ psychology (1890, 192). There is a discernible movement, from Reid through Stewart, Brown and Hamilton, culminating in James, where the issue of the temporality of experience – including the experience of temporal objects as well as the temporal properties experience must have in order to function as it does – raises problems within the psychologies offered by each philosopher, which the next then solves by complicating the picture with the addition of new faculties.

These issues persist in James’ writings even outside of his chapter on the Perception of Time. Consider Reid’s criticism of Locke for failing to recognize the role that memory must play in reflection in order for us to reach certain ideas like succession. James answers Comte’s criticism of the use of introspection as a method in psychology by citing memory as a necessary supplement to occurrent consciousness. Comte claimed (see James 1890, 188 for reference) that introspection must necessarily lag at least slightly behind everything in consciousness, because it is by definition impossible to both have an experience and to reflect on that experience in the same moment. James responds in part, that the contents for which we introspect linger just long enough that we can, with the use of memory, reliably introspect in just the way Comte denied (*Principles*, 189).

James’ answer is strongly connected to the Scottish Common Sense views on the matter because James is not in this case talking about memory in general. He specifically means the kind of ‘memory’ that Brown termed ‘rapid retrospect’, the

kind of memory that Reid claimed was necessary in order to discern that a succession of ideas is in fact a succession. It is just this aspect of memory that James will go on to say, just a few chapters later in *Principles*, is in fact the backwards-looking part of the saddle that is the specious present. Presumably he did not rely on the specious present in refuting Comte because he had not yet introduced it; it is interesting that he took recourse to the same answer that the Common Sense tradition would have given.

5. Hodgson

The philosopher who had the most impact on establishing the characteristics of temporal experience as an important issue is, ironically, someone least associated with the topic, and whose name has been largely erased from intellectual history. Shadworth Hollway Hodgson was a monumental figure in the philosophical circles of late 19th century Britain. He wrote three major books (*Time and Space*, 1865; *Philosophy of Reflection*, 2 vols., 1878; *Metaphysic of Experience*, 4 vols., 1898) published widely in venues such as *Mind*, and was a co-founder and then president of the Aristotelian Society for 14 years. And yet, scarcely twenty years after the publication of his four-volume lifework, Hodgson's name was all but absent from philosophical discussion, a situation that then turned into almost complete ignorance of his existence and influence during his lifetime. Given his extensive involvement in psychology and philosophy in Britain during this period, it is a historical puzzle as to why he receives so little attention in comparison with his peers.

Hodgson published two books prior to James' publication of the *Principles*. James certainly read one in particular, *Philosophy of Reflection* (1878), which he referenced a number of times. While Kelly did state the specious present doctrine, and provide the name that stuck, Hodgson had actually already developed and named the doctrine four years earlier– he called it the 'empiric present'. Furthermore, based on evidence such as correspondence between the two, it is clear that Hodgson had a deep and ongoing impact on James' thought, as part of a

friendship that included but was not limited to philosophical discussion and lasted for decades.

In *Philosophy of Reflection*, Hodgson takes up the line of thought we have just traced through the Scottish Common Sense philosophers. Hamilton established that some minimum duration is necessary for consciousness, as a consequence of consciousness depending on a contrast between two different states or objects (classed together as ‘feelings’).

The minimum of consciousness contains two different feelings. One alone would not be felt. ... But of this *apparent* simultaneity there are two cases: the first is that of a real simultaneity, the two sub-feelings are really parts in coexistence, not in succession; the second is that in which one of them is felt as growing fainter (called going when referred to its place in succession), the other as growing stronger (called coming when referred to the succession). The simultaneous perception of both sub-feelings, whether as parts of a coexistence or of a sequence, is the total feeling, the minimum of consciousness, and this minimum has duration. (1878, 249-50)

This passage illustrates how Hodgson started from, but then went on to clarify and expand, Hamilton’s temporal requirement that consciousness include at least two feelings and thus span some duration,. Two feelings that were felt simultaneously are sufficient for consciousness, but not the *only* way we can be conscious. We can compare two feelings without those feelings fully co-existing: one is ‘coming’ and the other is ‘going’, and as such, they overlap without being simultaneous. This means that Hodgson allows for temporally extended feelings that, within the temporally extended range of consciousness, wax and wane in the way James describes in his chapter on Perception of Time.

Hodgson even presents a paragraph that is almost identical with the one Kelly provided, with just a slight difference in terminology for the name of the doctrine. Compare to the passage in section 3 that James quoted from Kelly.

Crudely and popularly we divide the course of time into Past, Present, and Future; but, strictly speaking, there is no Present; it is composed of Past and Future divided by an indivisible point or instant. That instant, or time-point, is the strict *present*. What we loosely call the Present is an empirical portion of the course of time, containing at least the minimum of consciousness, in which the instant of change is the present time-point. (1878, 253)

Hodgson continues with the distinction, introduced by Reid, between a crude or vulgar conception of the present and the strict conception of the present. But now Hodgson adds the idea that on the strict conception, the present is not an entity, and that what we call the present is simply that minimum duration required to encompass at least two distinct feelings in order to be conscious. This is really the first statement of the specious present doctrine as such.

It is well-known that James' *Principles* served as an important source of ideas and inspiration for Husserl as he wrote the lectures that became *Phenomenology of Inner Time Consciousness*. As such, Hodgson had an indirect influence on Husserl's project of understanding the structure of temporal experience, as did Reid, Hamilton, and others. However, it turns out that Hodgson also had a direct influence on Husserl (1966), via the massive tome he published after James had published the *Principles*. In *Metaphysic of Experience*, volume I, Hodgson lays a groundwork for his project with a number of remarkable features. The first is the manner in which Hodgson takes his empiricist examination of experience so far that he ends up with something that is, more or less, Husserlian phenomenology. Given the break between empiricist, analytically-oriented and phenomenological-oriented philosophy that is generally taken to occur somewhere in the early twentieth century, Hodgson occupies a unique historical position in occupying both of these traditions just prior to such a split. It is likely that the way in which Hodgson's work was so quickly dropped from British philosophical discussion concerned the radically analytic turn it took soon after his publication of *Metaphysic*, a turn in which his style of philosophizing simply had no place. This makes Hodgson a culminating figure of 18th and 19th century empiricism.

The second remarkable feature of Hodgson's volume I, obviously connected to the first, is how strikingly Hodgson's first four chapters or so parallel the points made by Husserl in *Phenomenology of Inner Time Consciousness*, even to the extent of using the same examples as illustration. Reading Hodgson's first volume, and then reading Husserl, the connections between the two are so strong as to make it highly unlikely that they are merely coincidental. And in fact, it turns out that Husserl had read Hodgson's *Metaphysic of Experience* right around the time that he was

compiling the notes that were subsequently edited into the posthumous *Phenomenology* (Andersen and Grush 2009). It is not an accident that Husserl's *Phenomenology* has such striking similarities to Hodgson's *Metaphysic*.

The upshot of this is that Hodgson deserves a great deal more credit for his views on time and experience, as well as his influence on James' views on these matters and on Husserl's. Furthermore, there is a wealth of historically and philosophically rich material in Hodgson's writings that shed light on empiricist thought at the time and on contemporary discussions of temporal experience.

6. Later James

We've now seen that many of the ideas articulated by James in *Principles* regarding temporal experience had been actively discussed for more than a century before he wrote, and that Hodgson played a key role in James' development of the specious present doctrine. In this section I will present a schematic argument to the effect that there is an important shift in James' thinking about temporal experience from the time he wrote *Principles* to his later writings on pragmatism. Further, in order to understand James' view on temporal experience specifically, we must understand the picture of experience in general that is the foundation of his pragmatism. James moves from simply *contrasting* the experienced versus 'real' present, noting that they differ, to *privileging* the experienced present over the purportedly real one. This shift was part of his larger critique of intellectualism, and at least in part a response to what James saw as misuse of the specious present doctrine. He takes an unusually broad and rich view of experience, which is why he can rest the notion of truth squarely on it. Without keeping in mind this enriched notion of experience as described in his pragmatic writings, our understanding of James' views on the experience of time will be impoverished. The shift in James' thinking and the notion of experience on which he relies fundamentally alter the way we should think about his views on what the specious present is and what it indicates about experience and time.

As we've already seen, James originally presented the specious present doctrine in contrast with the 'obvious present'. The specious present is temporally extended, encompassing some part of the immediate past and having both a forward-looking and a rearward-looking element. The obvious present is punctate; it is the point on a timeline where the past and future meet. James presents the specious present as a feature of our *experience* of time, and the obvious present as a feature of a (mathematical) representation of time. Importantly, he does not take a stance on what the real nature of time is, or on which of the two conflicting representations of time should take precedence (which would, indeed, be rather odd in a book establishing the principles of psychology). In labeling the experiential phenomenon 'specious', meaning apparent or illusory, there is a slight implication that the experience is mistaken or nonveridical. James is primarily concerned with describing this feature of experience and discussing the measurements of its range, rather than adjudicating our time sense as a reliable indicator of time itself.

When we look forward about twenty years, though, a different picture emerges. Between 1902 and 1910, James developed his pragmatism as a full-fledged radicalization of empiricism. Even more than Peirce, from whom he took the term, James relied on experience as the ultimate arbiter of truth. His version of pragmatism is surprisingly misunderstood, a situation partially explained by James' use of evocative and metaphorical language to present it (his talk of the usefulness of beliefs and our need to inquire as to their 'cash value' evoked unfortunate stereotypes of crass Americans to his British audience).

James was struck by Bergson's writings on time and memory, and heartily endorsed Bergson's rejection of the overintellectualization taking place within philosophyⁱⁱⁱ. Concepts, thought James, and the logic that governs them, were being given too much weight when apparent conceptual contradictions arose. A variety of philosophers in the Hegelian tradition, for instance, thought that there were contradictions within the content of immediate experience. James thought this a ridiculous impossibility. Any contradiction that might arise in immediate experience would only be due to the concepts chosen to imperfectly describe or represent that experience. Prior to description, experience can be rich and complex, but not self-

contradictory. Use of concepts to describe experience constituted taking something dynamic and changing and cutting out a static piece. In any potential contradiction, then, the blame should sit on the static concepts rather than experience itself.

This can be illustrated by looking at the use to which McTaggart, as an example, put the specious present. McTaggart (1908) famously argued for the unreality of time. As part of that argument, he addressed the criticism that our experience certainly is of a genuinely moving present moment. We experience time, and we experience the present as moving: how then, the criticism goes, can it be unreal?. McTaggart rather cleverly avoids answering the charge that his view contradicts experience by reference to the specious present. Because the extent of the specious present may be slightly different for different people, there may be some event that is still 'present' to one while 'past' to another. Thus, claims McTaggart, experience contradicts itself already. He certainly need not reconcile his view to our experience of the present; there is nothing wrong with contradicting the self-contradictory. As to the unreality of time itself, a large part of McTaggart's argument comes down to the fact that past and future are exclusive – they cannot be predicated of the same thing. And yet the reality of time implies that we must call an event future and past, he claims. Therefore, McTaggart concludes, time itself is contradictory and cannot exist. It is this kind of use of concepts and the logic governing concepts against which James reacted so strongly. If our concept-logic allows us to conclude that, because of contradiction, time itself does not exist, this should be taken as indicating a shortcoming in the concepts and logic used to reach that conclusion.

James' crusade against intellectualism constituted his taking a stand on a generic version of the contrast we just saw that he remained agnostic on in *Principles*, namely, on how to think about a phenomenon when there is a conflict between the way our concepts represent it and the way we experience it. Pre-pragmatism, James can be understood as agnostic with respect to this conflict. Post-pragmatism, James comes down emphatically on the side of experience over concepts. James makes points that apply to a wide range of experiences that are potentially contradictory when described in certain ways, as well as to the

experience of the present. “Time itself comes to us in drops” of experience, rather than indefinitely subdividable increments (1909, 734). Representations of temporal experience that involve the assumption that time itself, especially the present moment, ‘really’ are punctate make time artificial and static, and with it, experience. In an especially Jamesian turn of phrase, he says, “But all these abstract concepts are but as flowers gathered, they are only moments dipped out from the stream of time, snap-shots taken, as by a kinoscopic camera, at a life that in its original coming is continuous” (1909, 735-6).

His lectures on pragmatism contain an extremely elaborate and inclusive view of what experience itself is. James’ pragmatism, recall, recast the notion of truth as simply being that which best organizes our experiences; beliefs are useful if they are true, and they are true if they are useful (1907, 575). This might look trivially false, if one were to evaluate such statements using something like a representational view of experience, where experience simply represents how things are in the world. In that sort of view, experience gives us access to the world that is the way it is, regardless of our experience. James thought this was insufficiently empiricist (ibid., 508). To genuinely rely on experience for knowledge, we need to accept that there really is nothing but experiences on which to rely. Ideas or beliefs about the world should provide schemes by which we can reliably act in the world and achieve desired consequences, and allow us to reliably predict what will happen. Most importantly, beliefs are true when they allow us to make the most sense out of our experiences.

...‘truth’ in our ideas and beliefs means the same thing that it means in science. It means, [the the pragmatists] say, nothing but this, *that ideas (which themselves are but parts of our experience) become true just in so far as they help us to get into satisfactory relation with other parts of our experience, to summarize them and get about among them by conceptual short-cuts instead of following the interminable succession of particular phenomena.* (1907, 512; italics in original)

James make the notion of experience so broad that it encompasses as a subset any other category, such as representations, ideas, conceptions, etc. that one might use as a means of defining truth. This understanding of experience was sufficiently

novel that James' pragmatism had a rather bad initial reception, at least in Britain, and continues to be frequently misunderstood. If one were to start with what he says about truth and its relationship to experience, and combine it with an ordinary understanding of experience, then the resulting notion of truth may seem weak or untenable. If, on the other hand, we start by assuming that there is something interesting to the notion of truth James offers in his pragmatist writings, and then work towards the notion of experience needed to serve that role for truth, it becomes clear that James intends 'experience' to be much richer and more fundamental than it is ordinarily taken to be.

In order to fully understand James' views on the specious present, then, we need to consider the chapter "The Perception of Time," and we also need to take a broader view of James' later writings that bear on temporal experience specifically. But in order to understand James' views on the experience of time, we need to get clear on James' extremely unique and rich views on experience more broadly, and the relationship between experience and the concepts we use to render that experience coherent, to relate different experiences together, and to predict and control experiences in the future.

7. Conclusion

Contemporary discussions of temporal experience rely on the characterization of the specious present doctrine as James presented it in chapter 15 of *The Principles of Psychology*. Because of James' peculiar citation of Kelly in that chapter, the historical development of this doctrine has been obscured. As I have shown here, there was a substantive and ongoing discussion of the temporal character of experience from which James drew for his own work. The philosophers contributing to this discussion, including but certainly not limited to Reid, Stewart, Brown, Hamilton, and Kelly, had a great deal more to say on the subject than made it into James' brief presentation. The four themes presented earlier illustrate how this history of the specious present draws connections between perception, memory,

attention, consciousness, representations of time, and the nature of experience in general.

James himself also had a great deal more to say about experience and its temporal characteristics than is found in *Principles*. His pragmatism included at least two key issues that need to be accommodated in any adequate presentation of his views on the experience of time. The first is his critique of intellectualism, and of the way in which our conceptualization of experience can lead us astray. The second is the incredible rich view of experience that James takes. His pragmatism, depending so radically on experience and truth as what best organizes that experience, will sound trite if accompanied by an insufficient understanding of what James takes 'experience' to include. Likewise, our understanding of the specious present doctrine should be informed by James' views on experience in general, including the writings subsequent to *Principles*.

In conclusion, then, there is a fascinating set of mysteries associated with the history of the specious present doctrine. A few, such as the identity of 'Clay', have been uncovered. Some, like Hodgson's abrupt disappearance from philosophical discussion, remain. And this history provides a wealth of ideas to mine for refinement of contemporary accounts of temporal experience.

References

- Andersen, Holly and Grush, Rick (2009). A Brief History of Time Consciousness: Historical Precursors to James and Husserl. *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 45(3):413-442.
- Anonymous [E. Robert Kelly, 'E.R. Clay'], (1882). *The Alternative: A Study in Psychology*. London: Macmillan and Co.
- Broad, C.D (1923). *Scientific Thought*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Brown, Thomas (1851). *Lectures on the Philosophy of the Mind*, in volume 1, *Philosophy of the Human Mind* (4 vols.). Edinburgh: Adam & Charles Black.
- Dainton, Barry (2001). *Time and Space*. Chesham: Acumen.
- Dainton, Barry (2006). *Stream of consciousness: unity and continuity in conscious experience*. Taylor and Francis.
- Gallagher, Shaun (1997). Mutual Enlightenment: Recent phenomenology in cognitive science. *Journal of Consciousness Studies*.4(3): 195-214.

- Gilbert, James (1972). *Designing the Industrial State*. University of California: Quadrangle Books.
- Grush, Rick (2003). Brain Time and Phenomenal Time, in *Cognition and the Brain: the philosophy and neuroscience movement*, eds. Andrew Brook and Kathleen Akins. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Grush, Rick (2006). How to, and how not to, bridge computational cognitive neuroscience and Husserlian phenomenology of time consciousness. *Synthese* 153(3): 417-450.
- Hamilton, Sir William (1856). *Discussions on Philosophy and Literature*. New York: Harper.
- Hamilton, Sir William (1861) [1969 reprint]. *Lectures on Metaphysics and Logic* (2 vols.). Edinburgh and London: Blackwood and Sons.
- Hodgson, Shadworth Hollway (1865). *Time and Space*. London: Longman, Green, Longman, Roberts, and Green.
- Hodgson, Shadworth Hollway (1878). *Philosophy of Reflection* (2 vols.) London: Longman, Green, Longman, Roberts, and Green.
- Hodgson, Shadworth Hollway(1898) [1980 reprint]. *Metaphysic of Experience* (4 vols.) London: Longman, Green, Longman, Roberts, and Green [reprint Garland Publishing, New York].
- Husserl, Edmund (1966). *Zur Phänomenologie des inneren Zeitbewusstseins* [1893-1917]. Herausgegeben von Rudolf Boehm, Husserliana X, The Hague.
- James, William (1890). *Principles of Psychology* (2 vols.). New York: Henry Holt.
- James, William (1909). *A Pluralistic Universe*, from (1988) *William James: Writings 1902-1910*. New York: Library of America.
- James, William (1904) *Pragmatism*, from (1988) *William James: Writings 1902-1910*. New York: Library of America.
- Kelly, Sean D., 2005, 'The Puzzle of Temporal Experience', in *Cognition and the Brain: the philosophy and neuroscience movement*, eds. Andrew Brook and Kathleen Akins. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Le Poivedin, Robin (1999). Egocentric and Objective Time. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, XCIX: 19–36.
- Locke, John (1690) [1975 reprint] *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter H. Nidditch. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Lutz, A. and Thompson, E. (2003). Neurophenomenology: Integrating Subjective Experience and Brain Dynamics in the Neuroscience of Consciousness. *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 10(9/10): 31-52.
- McTaggart, J.E. (1908). The Unreality of Time. *Mind* 18: 457-484.

- Meyers, Gerald (1971). William James on Time Perception. *Philosophy of Science* 38(3): 353-360.
- Oaklander, L. Nathan (2002). Presentism, Ontology and Temporal Experience, in *Time, Reality and Experience*, ed. Craig Callender. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Plumer, Gilbert (1985). The Myth of the Specious Present. *Mind* New Series 94(373): 19-35.
- Pockett, Susan (2003). How long is now? Phenomenology and the specious present. *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 2(1): 55-68.
- Reid, Thomas (1786; 8th ed. with commentary, 1895) [1967 reprint]. *Philosophical Works: with notes and supplementary dissertations by Sir William Hamilton* (2 vols.) Hildesheim: G. Olms Verlagsbuchhandlung.
- Reid, Thomas (1785) [2002 reprint] *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, ed. Derek Brookes. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Sellars, Wilfrid (1982). *Science and Metaphysics: Variations on Kantian Themes*. Boston, MA: Brill Academic Publishers.
- Stewart, Dugald (1792) [1971 reprint]. *Elements of the Philosophy of the Human Mind*, in vol. 2 of Stewart, Dugald. *The Collected works of Dugald Stewart, edited by Sir William Hamilton* (9 vols.). Westmead, UK: Gregg International Publishers.
- Varela, Francisco (1999). The Specious Present: A Neurophenomenology of Time Consciousness. In *Naturalizing Phenomenology: Issues in Contemporary Phenomenology and Cognitive Science* Eds. Petitot, Varela, Pachoud and Roy. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

ⁱ Much of the historical research presented here was done in collaboration with Rick Grush (see Andersen and Grush 2009). Special thanks to Rick Grush and Endre Begby for discussion and feedback.

ⁱⁱ James references Reid's criticism of Locke's "dim" account in the same chapter as where the specious present is introduced (1890, 609).

ⁱⁱⁱ See especially "Bergson's Critique of Intellectualism" (James, 1909).