

'Beyond A- and B-Time' Reconsidered

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Abstract This article is a response to Clifford Williams's claim that the debate between A- and B theories of time is misconceived because these theories do not differ. I provide some missing support for Williams's claim that the B-theory includes transition, by arguing that representative B-theoretic explanations for why we experience time as passing (even though it does not) are inherently unstable. I then argue that, contra Williams, it does not follow that there is nothing at stake in the A- versus B debate.

Keywords Clifford Williams. Metaphysics of time. B-theory. Transition

Introduction

Contemporary analytic metaphysics of time can be viewed as shaped by the dispute between A-theorists and B-theorists. The B-theory can be broadly understood as the conjunction of the following three theses:

- 1) All times exist and are ontologically on a par (eternalism);
- 2) There are no monadic temporal properties of pastness, presentness or futurity but only dyadic temporal relations of succession, precedence and simultaneity;
- 3) There are no tensed facts, but only tenseless facts, such as the fact that my writing this {occurs} (tenselessly) on a Friday, and the fact that this event {precedes} the event of your reading this by a certain interval.

The B-theory is opposed by a number of different A-theories, all of which involve rejecting at least one of these three tenets. Some of the most prominent A-theories reject the first tenet. Thus, presentists hold that only what is present exists, and growing-block theorists hold that only the past and the present exist.

Clifford Williams, a former B-theorist, has over the last fifteen years argued repeatedly that the A- versus B-theory debate is misconceived because A- and Btheories do not differ. Although I do not agree with his final conclusion, his concerns seem to me to deserve more attention than they have received so far.

In this article, I engage with and respond to Williams's arguments, as well as to an existing critique by Mikel Burley (Burley 2006). Contra Burley, I suggest that the proper B-theoretic response to Williams is neither to deny his claim that the concept of time must include transition, nor to maintain that transition is a purely experiential phenomenon, but to insist that transition is already included in the B-theoretic view. Though this is conceding ground to Williams, I also argue that it does not follow that A- and B-theories do not differ.

I will focus on Williams's most recent publications, 'Beyond A- and B-time' (Williams 2003), 'B-Time Transition' (Williams 1998a), and 'A Bergsonian Approach to A- and B-time' (Williams 1998b).

Williams's First Claim: Transition and the B-Theory

Williams's starting point is the observation that the main difference between A- and B-theories, as participants of the debate see it, concerns temporal transition or temporal passage. (Note that Williams uses the terms 'passage', 'becoming', 'flow' and 'transition' interchangeably; I will follow suit.) This is correct: it is widely assumed that the main point at issue in the debate is whether or not time passes (i.e. involves transition), and whether or not it has a dynamic aspect.

Williams then makes two main claims, offering a number of inter-connected

considerations in support of each of them. The first is that it is a conceptual truth about time that it involves transition, and that since the B-theory is a theory about time, it too includes the concept of transition. The second is that only one kind of transition is imaginable, and that, therefore, A-time and B-time do not differ from one another. I will take these in turn.

Consider the first claim: it is a conceptual truth that time passes and therefore, the B-theory must include transition. Williams intends this to be non-controversial, “a control belief, one which is part of the background to debates on the nature of time and not a contested claim”. Unfortunately, it is not only contested, but very difficult to support, as Williams’s own efforts demonstrate. He offers three supporting considerations.

The first is this:

“We cannot get from one time or event to another unless there is transition between them. It is transition that carries us along and gets us to later times. We have to traverse, or “go through,” intervening intervals to get from one time to the next. If we did not traverse intervals between moments, we would be stuck at the earlier moments. This is a conceptual truth about time, whether it be A-time or B-time.” (Williams 1998a, p. 78)

These remarks are a manifestation of a tendency, common to all of us, to think of transition as a process that transfers metaphysical privilege (such as being the time that exists) to later and later times, taking us with it. Unfortunately, this way of thinking raises more questions about transition than it answers, and so it cannot easily serve as an undisputed and meaningful premise in an argument for including transition in the B-theory. Simply put, the problem is that such comments are literally nonsensical since we do not literally have to get from time to time. The notion of ‘being stuck at one time’ is strictly nonsensical, since it implies that one can be at a given time for some time. Though natural, this way of thinking does not point to a promising line of argument.

The second consideration concerns the difference between spatial and temporal extension.

“[I]f there were no transition between different moments or events, temporal extension would not differ from spatial extension. There must be something that differentiates the two kinds of extension, and this can only be transition.” (Williams 1998a, p.61)

This is somewhat puzzling. Why is something needed to make temporal and spatial extension differ—do they not differ already? Temporal extension, i.e. succession, is not spatial extension, but succession, after all.

Williams’s third consideration consists in a reference to Broad’s distinction between time’s extensive and transitory aspects. The extensive aspect of time, according to Broad, consists of duration and temporal relations; it is in respect of this aspect that time is analogous to space, according to Broad. The transitory aspect, in contrast, has no spatial analogy—it is the coming into being and passing away, the passage, or, as Broad calls it, absolute becoming.

“The basic truth about temporal extension is that it would not be what it is without temporal transition. The concept of the former contains the concept of the latter.” (Williams 2003, p. 80)

Burley argues that these considerations, plausible though they seem to him, will do nothing to convince B-theorists. The latter will simply insist that there are two intrinsically different kinds of extension, one spatial and one temporal and that we need not think of temporal extension as like spatial extension plus something extra. And even if they do agree, and concur that “any theory of time would have to contain reference to some sort of transition” (Williams 1996, p. 372), they will claim that it is our experience of time only, rather than time itself, that involves transition. Burley calls this an antirealist view of transition: transition is a purely experiential phenomenon, but does not characterize time itself.

This is entirely correct: B-theorists will typically disagree with Williams’s conceptual

claim, which is insufficiently well supported by Williams, and if they do make reference to transition, they will typically treat it as a purely experiential phenomenon.

However, this is not the right B-theoretic response. The reason we need not think of temporal extension as like spatial extension plus something extra is not only that temporal extension is not spatial extension, but also that it already includes transition, i.e. that it is in itself dynamic. This view of the B-theory and its relation to transition is unusual, but not without defenders (e.g. Oaklander 2004; Savitt 2002); I defend it in detail elsewhere¹. I argue that the reason we can take succession to be itself dynamic is that there are limitations to how deeply transition, and dynamicity, can be conceptualised by any metaphysical theory, whether A- or B-theoretic. Since even A-theories at best make a primitivist appeal to passage as the process underlying certain elements of temporal reality, a similar B-theoretic stance is not trivial in any objectionable sense.

Unsurprisingly, this kind of B-theoretic stance is echoed in Williams's own proposal for a compromise between A- and B-theories. He suggests positing 'supersession', "which would be inherently different from other kinds of transition—the transition from number to number or the transition from place to place, say" (Williams 2003, p. 89). The idea is that nothing is left out by a conception that contains supersession—passage is included in it. The proper B-theoretic response to Williams's proposal consists of pointing out that succession already achieves all that. I provide a defense of this claim in the next section.

There is one more consideration in support of Williams's first claim that is only implicit in Williams's own writings, but is made explicit by Burley. Very plausibly, Burley connects Williams's comments on 'getting from time to time' with the following passage from 'A Bergsonian Approach to A- and B-time':

"The datum I begin with is embodied in the epigraph to Bergson's *Creative Evolution*: 'I find, first of all, that I pass from state to state'. This datum is not, of course, just that Bergson himself intuits the passing from state to state, but that others do so as well. The datum is, in fact, that all of us do. What we first notice about time is some sort of shift or transition. We may not think of it as being 'from state to state', as Bergson puts it, [...] but we do, like Bergson, experience it as passing—something like a motion, but not itself a motion". (Williams 1998b, p. 382)

On the basis of this passage, Burley takes Williams to be claiming that we could not have the kind of experience we have if there were no transition. As Burley points out, this is not a conceptual claim as it stands—there is a suppressed premise concerning an important link between the concept of time and our experience of time. Burley thinks Williams has not said much about this link, but it is more charitable to take Williams's discussion of his second main claim (later in the same article) to be partly aimed at demonstrating that there is such a link. As we will see, Williams does say quite a bit about the connection between theories of time and the experience of time. However, as we will also see, it is doubtful that Williams achieves his aim in that discussion.

So far, then, Williams has not provided much support for his (first) claim that it is a conceptual truth that time passes and that, therefore, the B-theory too must include transition. In the next section, I try to provide some of the missing support for the claim that the B-theory includes transition (though not for the conceptual claim). I examine two B-theoretic accounts of our experience of passage and argue that they involve a certain tension that is best resolved by acknowledging that the B-theory already includes passage².

For Williams's View of the B-Theory

¹ 'Why the A- versus B-debate is not About Whether Time Passes' (unpublished).

² This defense of my view of the B-theory is independent of, and supplementary to, that provided in 'Why the A- versus B-debate is not About Whether Time Passes'.

Our experience of time as passing (or what is taken for such) traditionally poses a *prima facie* problem for B-theorists. Recently, some B-theorists (see e.g. Le Poidevin 2007; and Paul 2010) have thought it necessary to try to explain away as illusory not only our experience of passage, but along with it, our experience of succession and change. In my view, these attempts are as unpromising as they are unnecessary, since they explain away rather too much, including our perception of what should be uncontroversial elements of the B-theory (e.g. change). And one might think that these attempts already raise the suspicion that passage is in fact a part of the B-theoretic conception: if in trying to explain away our experience of passage, we end up also explaining away our experience of succession, then perhaps we should ask whether passage is anything external to succession or whether it is perhaps contained in it. However, here I will focus on another B-theoretic approach to the problem of accounting for our experience of passage, which supports that conclusion even more directly. Though Hugh Mellor and Arthur Falk both aim to explain away our experience of passage as illusory, on closer examination it turns out that they do not explain away anything. Rather, they show how certain veridical aspects of experience arise on the B-theoretic conception, and then, rather surprisingly, classify those aspects of experience as illusory experiences of passage. Therefore, by the lights of their own explanatory accounts, these authors should acknowledge that our experience of passage is veridical, and that B-time does, after all, involve transition.

Mellor

Mellor proposes that our experience of passage is constituted by changes in our conscious A-beliefs (A-beliefs are beliefs expressed in tensed language, like the belief that it is Monday today):

“[A]s A-propositions, unlike B-propositions, change their truth-values from time to time, if we are to keep our A-beliefs true we must keep changing them [...] How often my now-beliefs about the time need changing depends on how precise they are: once a year if they tell me what year it is; every second during a countdown to the start of a race; and so on. [...] These changes embody the psychological truth in the metaphysical falsehood that time flows, i.e. that events [...] really are moving in A-time, from being tomorrow, to being today, to being yesterday, and so on.” (Mellor 1998a, p. 66)

“Not all changes of belief [embody our experience of the flow of time] however. For a start, experiences are conscious, and since most beliefs are rarely conscious, so too are most of their changes. [...] But many [...] of the changes in the now-beliefs induced in me by my senses are conscious, and these [...] serve to show how we can truly experience a flow of time which does not in fact exist.” (Mellor 1998a, p. 67)

Although they are *prima facie* straightforward, Mellor’s pronouncements that “[e]ven though time does not flow in reality, in our minds the time of our lives really does flow” and that our experience of passage is “not only real but true” (Mellor 2000, p. 56) highlight an unresolved tension. Is there something about our changing A-beliefs that is in some way mistaken, since it does not reflect temporal reality? Or is there no error involved in our changing A-beliefs? But if so, and if these also constitute our experience of time as passing, then how can we deny that time passes? One might look for the answer in Mellor’s view of tensed language, which is somewhat unusual among B-theorists. Mellor is what Zimmerman calls a ‘serious tenses’ (Zimmerman 2005). Like most contemporary B-theorists, Mellor holds that the meanings of A-beliefs are not identical with the meanings of any B-beliefs (e.g. the belief that my writing this {occurs} on a Monday). But he reserves the term ‘content’ for the semantic functions of A- (and B-) beliefs, i.e. for what is more commonly known as their ‘character’ or ‘linguistic meaning’, rather than for the truth conditions they return. So for example, on Mellor’s view, the belief ‘it is Monday today’ has the same content no matter when it is held, but that content is

sometimes true and sometimes false (Mellor 1998a, p. 66). In contrast, the more usual B-theoretic view is that which content is expressed by 'it is Monday today' differs from time to time, so that there is no constant belief content that changes its truth-value.

The reason this might be thought to help is that like most B-theorists, Mellor thinks that temporal passage, if it existed, would consist of changing A-facts, and these seem to be in some sense mirrored by his changing true A-beliefs.

But of course, it is important not to read too much into Mellor's view of tensed language, and in particular into his claim that A-beliefs change their truth-values over time. Mellor himself talks of a "terminological preference" in this context (Mellor and Lucas 1998b, p.35/6). Mellor's A-beliefs' contents do not introduce any A-theoretic element into his system. The crucial dividing line for him is that between tenseless and tensed truth conditions, and he is very clear in his rejection of the latter. So, on Mellor's view, there is nothing at all mistaken about our changing A-beliefs. They are merely true temporally perspectival beliefs, held at the right times.

Another reason to think this is that Mellor's position regarding A-beliefs is exactly the same as his position regarding spatially and personally perspectival beliefs. The spatial case is particularly instructive. Since he holds that a belief like 'This is Oxford' has a content and meaning that is the same in all places, but a truthvalue that depends on where it is held, his position here exactly mirrors his view of A-beliefs. So naturally the question arises: why don't our true spatial beliefs, suitably varied according to location, give rise to an experience analogous to that of temporal passage?

Mellor's answer to this question is two-fold (Mellor 1998a, p. 96; Mellor 2000, p. 55).

First, at any given time we do not have different beliefs in our different spatial parts (e.g. in our two feet), so there is no spatial variation of spatially perspectival beliefs at a given time; second, even if there were, that variation would not constitute a change, since, for Mellor, change requires that there be a single entity located in the different spatial locations whose properties (e.g. beliefs) vary spatially. This identity condition is why spatial variation never counts as change, while temporal variation sometimes does (namely in the case of things as opposed to events). And ultimately, Mellor's explanation for why we only apply the concept of change to the temporal variation is based on his endorsement of a causal theory of time. What distinguishes time from space is that the temporal dimension is the causal dimension.

So let us summarise what, according to Mellor, is special about time, temporal variation, and our changing A-beliefs. Temporal variation, we are told, in some cases constitutes change, while spatial variation never does. And the reason for this difference lies, ultimately, in causation.

But of course neither change, nor causation, is absent from, or somehow incompatible with, the B-theory. So it seems that all the elements that collectively ground our experience of time are natural elements of the B-theoretic view.

If there is nothing at all mistaken, and nothing at all A-theoretic, about our changing A-beliefs, and if the reason they embody an experience of passage lies solely in facts concerning genuine elements of the B-theoretic universe, then it seems correct for Mellor to say that our experience of passage, on his view, is "not only real but true". However, it then seems odd also to claim that temporal passage, if it could exist, would have to consist of changing A-facts. If purely B-theoretic facts about our psychology ground the claim that we have a veridical experience of passage, then how can 'passage' refer to something that has no place in the B-theoretic (or indeed any other) universe, because it cannot exist? Putting the point slightly differently, what, on Mellor's proposal, do our changing A-beliefs really have to do with that impossible entity he calls 'passage' (or 'time flow'), if they have nothing to do with A-facts (because they have tenseless truth conditions)?

In my view, the right way to resolve this tension is by reserving the label 'passage' for the process that is included in the B-theory simply by virtue of its including succession. Mellor's changing temporally perspectival beliefs constitute

(part of) our experience of passage, and that experience is veridical, even on the B-theory.

Falk

Arthur Falk begins by dealing with our experience of the present, and builds an account of our experience of passage on that.

He suggests that we should think of ourselves as agents who interact with the world and correct our action in response to feedback from the environment. The feedback does not include temporal information; rather, we gather temporal information by receiving information at a certain time and acting on it then. He recommends thinking of perception as a process by which we directly attribute perceptual attributes to ourselves and the time and place at which the perception takes place. Then, by a systematic ‘use-mention confusion’, we mistake the time to which we attribute information for the time of the information itself, creating an “impression of nowness” even though the perceptual attributes are tenseless.

In Falk’s words:

“How do we get to the perceptual content’s being present, that is, present-tensed, from a tenseless attribute’s being perceptually directly attributed to the time of attribution? From a time’s being the time of the attribution to its being the time of the content attributed, i.e. from a time’s being a property of the representation to its being a property of the represented: here’s the primordial use-mention confusion and nature never selected against it! [...]

[C]onsidering just a simple negative feedback mechanism, the absence of a time indication from the content of its feedback does not hurt it, since it acts on any error signal upon its reception forthwith, and the timing of the signal is indicative of the time of the signalled content.” (Falk 2003, p. 224)

Note that Falk conceives of the explanandum, namely the “impression of nowness” or “a perceptual content’s being present-tensed”, as somehow linked to a perceptual content’s seemingly containing a time.

But what does an impression of nowness have to do with the alleged error, i.e. with taking the time of reception to be the time of the information? Indeed, where is the error? What is it we are mistakenly taking to be the case, according to Falk, when we confuse a property of the representation with a property of the represented?

Consider the explanans: usually, in this world, it is appropriate to act upon signals immediately after reception. That is, the world is not, for example, such that we receive information ‘all at once’ or scrambled, i.e. in ‘the wrong’ temporal order. Such worlds we could not handle, because we depend on gathering temporal information from when we receive it. So, we are fortunate in that our way of perceiving temporal information—by directly attributing—is not selected against. But then what the explanans targets is precisely directly attributing, and the associated habit of acting immediately upon signal arrival. But if that is what it means to ‘take the time of reception to be the time of the signal’, then we cannot be making a mistake. After all, as we have just noticed, in our world typically (and roughly), the timing of the signal is indicative of the time of the signalled content. Perhaps the idea is that the use-mention confusion is simply constituted (rather than created) by our habit of reacting to signals upon arrival. That is, perhaps the idea is just that direct attributers, by acting upon signals immediately, thereby take the time of reception to be the time of the content.

If this is right, Falk’s discussion supports a rather deflationary view of his claim that we perceive presentness. If an impression of nowness is constituted by our nature as direct attributers, and our associated adaptively valuable habit of acting upon signal arrival, that impression is veridical. We are ‘hard-wired’ so as to act on perceptual signals when we receive them—and thereby taking that content to be about present events, i.e. events from (roughly) the time of reception.

So far then, we have found no reason to attribute an error to beings who experience time as we do. Nor does Falk's approach to our experience of passage provide such a reason.

"With the now comes the whoosh, which is the flushing and freshening of the now. [...] The capturing of temporal information by direct attribution has the effect that information must be continuously flushed from the rudimentary feedback system and replaced by the information appropriate for the new time." (Falk 2003, p. 225)

Here the idea is that the objective causal structure of the world, and in particular the fact that (generally) causes precede their effects, partially delimits a temporal perceptual horizon, because perception is a causal process. Together, the "flushing" and "freshening" give rise to an experience of "whoosh and whiz", i.e. of passage. In short, our experience of passage, for Falk, boils down to a temporally limited perceptual horizon, combined with a sense of presentness accompanying the perception. But as we have seen, that sense of presentness is veridical, arising from our being constituted such as to react to signals upon arrival.

"[The flushing and freshening] is simply the system's both being aware of an undated content at a date and not being aware of it at a very close later date." (Falk 2003, p. 226)

Falk suggests that we empathize with a negative feedback system who is a direct attributer and who flushes and freshens, and that we ask ourselves how it experiences time.

"Now I ask you to momentarily endow it with a what-it-is-like-to-it-for-it-to-collect-and-flush-information and then empathize. Go into the inner life of such a being. How could this flushing of information be achieved except at the price of creating a sense of passage?" (Falk 2003, p. 225)

Like Mellor, Falk points to genuine aspects of the B-theoretic conception playing a role in time perception. The only problem is that there is no reason to think that we have created a sense of anything that was not there to begin with. The real work in his explanation is being done by noticing the difference between entertaining the B-theoretic conception, on the one hand, and being a being in B-time, on the other.

Why need we pay a price in order to simply acknowledge that experiencing B-time is different from thinking about it?

Thus Falk's insistence that our minds, even to some extent, 'create' a sense of passage, i.e. that we have thereby explained away a sense of 'whoosh and whiz', is not justified by his own lights. Like Mellor, Falk should acknowledge that passage is a natural part of the B-theoretic view: succession already includes transition.

Williams's Second Claim: A Mis-Guided Debate?

I have tried to provide some of the missing support for Williams's claim that the B-theory, too, includes transition. In this section, I examine his second main claim: only one kind of transition is imaginable, and therefore, A-time and B-time do not differ.

In 'A Bergsonian Approach...', Williams argues as follows. In order to do metaphysics of time, Williams says, we need to 'intuit' time, i.e. we need to employ (Bergsonian) intuition. As I understand it, the term 'intuition' is here being used to mean something like experience, and/or imagination. In particular, if A-time exists (i.e. some A-theory is correct), then our actual temporal experience is an intuition of A-time, so that in order to recognize the difference between A- and B-time, we must imagine experiencing B-time instead. Similarly, if B-time exists, we must imagine experiencing A-time and compare the result with our actual experience of B-time. Williams's contention is that this cannot be done: if we assume that time is A-theoretic, we cannot imagine a B-theoretic kind of temporal experience, and if we assume that it is B-theoretic, we cannot imagine an A-theoretic kind of temporal experience. Or, granting Williams's first claim: if time is A-theoretic, we are

experiencing A-transition, and cannot then imagine what experiencing a B-transition might be like; while if time is B-theoretic, we are experiencing B-transition, and cannot then imagine what experiencing an A-transition might be like.

He considers four potential contrasts: static/dynamic, all times real/only present exists, future determinate/open future, moving present/transition between occurrences. In each case, the result is that no difference can be 'intuited', i.e. imagined, using the above methodology.

This should come as no surprise. What we are doing is the following: we are choosing to describe our temporal experience using one set of theoretical terms, and then using the other set to describe that very same, actual, kind of temporal experience. No wonder no difference becomes apparent.

One might object that this is a mis-construal of Williams's methodology. His idea is that once one set of terms is chosen as a description of temporal experience, the task is to intuit, i.e. imagine, a different kind of temporal experience describable by the other set of terms, and the result is that it cannot be done. But the reason it cannot be done is precisely his implicit presupposition that both theories must ground the same, namely the actual, kind of temporal experience.

Of course we can conduct thought experiments that involve time, and/or temporal experience, being very different from what it actually is. But that is not what Williams actually does: in order to do justice to each theory, he charitably assumes that each would, if correct, ground the same kind of temporal experience, namely the actual kind.

Granted, that presupposition follows very naturally if one grants Williams's first claim, namely that any theory of time, including the B-theory, must make reference to transition.

In fact it follows even if one takes B-theorists to be treating passage as a purely experiential phenomenon. After all, such a B-theoretic position would be designed specifically to accommodate an experience as of temporal passage.

However, it is also clear that given this presupposition, Williams's discussion loses much of its intended informative value. At best it shows that if both A- and Btime involve passage, then it is natural to think of both as predicting the same kind of temporal experience; and that, assuming that time passes, it is hard to imagine a different kind of experience, also of temporal passage.

Why, then, does Williams think that if his methodology fails to bring to light any differences between A- and B-time, A- and B-time do not differ? In 'A Bergsonian Approach...' Williams tries to reach this conclusion by arguing that the debate about time is one in which experience is used as evidence for theory, i.e. that we take time to be A- or B-theoretic partly because we think experience is of A- or of B-time. So, he says, we should be able to identify temporal experience as being of A- or of Btime, without presupposing one or the other theory of time. And for that we would need to be able to imagine the other kind of time existing, and temporal experience differing accordingly.

This is the point at which Williams attempts to argue for a close connection between theories of time and our experience of time. Williams suggests that all metaphysical disputes are located somewhere along the spectrum ranging from ones very closely connected with experiences to ones not very closely connected with experience. In his view, Plato's theory of forms is an example of a dispute located at the latter end of the spectrum. The idea is that in this case, we start out with an agreed upon fact (that we recognize deficient circularity), arrive at the theory as an explanation of it, and then infer from the theory a fact about experience, namely that we intuit forms.

According to Williams, the A- versus B-debate is very different from this, constituting an example of a debate at the former end of the spectrum. Here, experience is used as evidence for theory:

"The proper way to conceive of the debate between the A- and B-theories, then, is not as one between two rival metaphysical explanations of one

commonly agreed upon set of experiences. It is a debate, partly, about which theory experience confirms.” (Williams 1998b, p. 391)

Williams compares the debate to that between Whitehead’s event ontology and the Aristotelian substance ontology. In both cases, we should, according to Williams, simply be able to examine experience and find that it is one way rather than the other (of events or of substances, of A- or of B-time).

In support of this view, he cites A-theorists criticizing the B-theory for not being able to account for the phenomenology, as well as B-theorists trying to do so. About B-theorists’ view of the debate, Williams writes:

“B-theorists [...] have responded to A-theorists, not by claiming that experience is irrelevant to the issue, but by arguing that our time-experiences are not what A-theorists say they are.” (Williams 1998b, p. 392)

He proceeds to quote Mellor and Oaklander on the subject of temporal experience. He concludes:

“These writers are not making claims about our time-experiences on the basis of a theory of time. They are, rather, adopting a theory of time partly because they believe we have certain time-experiences.” (Williams 1998b, p. 392)

As a descriptive claim about the A- versus B-debate, this is not quite accurate.

First of all, taking experience to be relevant to the debate is not the same as taking it to be decisive. Second, B-theorists who are trying to account for the phenomenology are precisely not finding that experience confirms the B-theory and drawing our attention to that fact. They are, rather, agreeing with A-theorists that we experience time as passing, or the present as special, or the future as open, etc., but they try to explain that fact using only B-theoretic resources. That is, they are trying to explain away an aspect of experience that might easily be taken as support for an A-theoretic view of time. This is even evident from one of the passages that Williams quotes. Thus Oaklander writes that “neither the presence of experience nor our attitudes toward the past, present, or future pose insurmountable difficulties for an adequate analysis of tenseless time” (Oaklander 1993, p. 166). Contrary to what Williams claims, between such B-theoretic authors and A-theorists, there is actually agreement on some fact about experience.

Of course, other B-theorists do not agree that we experience time (e.g.) as passing. But even they do not base their view of time primarily on an inspection of temporal experience, on the contrary—they tend not to take the phenomenology too seriously.

So it is not the case that A- and B-theorists alike tend to argue from experience to theory. More importantly, Williams has not established that anything follows from the failure of his Bergsonian methodology to bring to light differences between A and B-time.

However, his discussion does serve to demonstrate how very natural it is to expect the debate to be about matters accessible to the imagination. The static/dynamic contrast, or very closely related contrasts, between rival metaphysical conceptions of time, can be traced much further back than McTaggart. Metaphysical disputes about the nature of time have always been, and are bound to still appear to be, about intuitively accessible matters.

But if the B-theory already includes transition, then the A- versus B-debate is not about such intuitively accessible matters, appearances to the contrary. The contemporary analytic debates about time are then not shaped by a disagreement that is accessible to ‘intuition’ in Williams’s sense, involving different ‘pictures’ or metaphors, or indeed any products of the imagination. Rather, they are shaped by a disagreement about such matters as whether all times are ontologically on a par, whether monadic temporal properties exist, and whether there are any tensed facts, where these matters are stripped of the import they *prima facie* appear to have for the issue of dynamicity versus stasis.

Conclusion

Williams's concerns about the genuine nature of the A- versus B-debate deserve more attention than they have received, especially given the ongoing debate about whether the distinction between presentism, the most prominent contemporary A-theory, and eternalism, is one of substance (see e.g. Zimmerman 2004). However, as I hope to have shown, Williams has not established his main claim that A- and B-time do not differ. While he is right about the relation between the B-theory and transition, and indeed right that his intuition-based methodology fails to latch on to the differences between A- and B-time, nothing alarming seems to follow from this. His description of the nature of the A- versus B-debate is not accurate; at best, his remarks might be seen as arguments for a normative claim, such as that the debate should be about intuitively accessible matters.

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