

# Temporal experience and the present in George P. Adams's eternalism

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## Abstract

In the early twentieth century, many philosophers in America thought that time should be taken seriously in one way or another. George P. Adams (1882-1961) argued that the past, present and future are all real but only the present is actual. I call this theory 'actualist eternalism'. In this paper, I articulate his novel brand of eternalism as one piece of his metaphysical system and I explain how he argued for the view in light of the best explanations of temporal experience and the present. I argue that his exploitation of analogies between time and modality offer some lessons for current debates about time such as the importance of providing a temporal epistemology. I also extract what I call the temporal boundary problem and argue that it gives rise to an unaddressed challenge for presentists and growing block theorists.

## Keywords

Adams, eternalism, specious present, temporal form, temporal epistemology

## Introduction

In the early twentieth century, many philosophers in America thought that time should be taken seriously in one way or another. In the 1920s and 1930s, George P. Adams (1882-1961) defended a novel brand of eternalism. On his view, the past, present and future are all real but only the present is actual. He thus drew an important distinction between the actual and the real: not all real things are actual; only the present is actual, the past and future are not actual, although the past and future are real. In addition, he drew several analogies between time and modality: e.g., past and future times are non-actual but real in an analogous way that, *prima facie*, possibilities are real but non-actual. Our (actual) world is one among many worlds, likewise the (actual) present is one among many instants. I call this theory *actualist eternalism*.

In this paper, I explain actualist eternalism in its context and I explore Adams's attempt to marry temporal metaphysics with modal metaphysics and to draw an analogy between temporal knowledge and modal knowledge. I argue that the exploitation of this analogy offers some lessons for current debates about time such as the importance of providing a temporal epistemology. I also extract what I call the temporal boundary problem and argue that it gives rise to an unaddressed challenge for presentists and growing block theorists.

Adams has been effectively forgotten in the history of philosophy. He was a product of the Harvard University system (AB, 1904; PhD, 1912), having studied under Josiah Royce, William James, George Santayana, and Hugo Münsterberg. And despite the fact that he held a chair of Mills Professor at Berkeley for two decades, he receives only a brief mention in detailed histories of American Philosophy as a member of ‘the Harvard second string’ residing in Berkeley (Kuklick, *The Rise of American Philosophy*, 254, note). Even as a student of Royce, no studies of Royce’s influence touch on the connection between Adams and Royce.<sup>1</sup> This is odd in one respect. Adams became one of the leading philosophers at Berkeley. Along with Stephen C. Pepper and Jacob Loewenberg, he trained a swathe of American philosophers. He was involved in the running of the Philosophical Union, co-editing its journal: *University of California Publications in Philosophy*. He co-edited *Contemporary American Philosophy* with William P. Montague, contributing what was recognized as one of its more important chapters: ‘Naturalism or Idealism’. In another respect this is understandable. Adams was part of the speculative philosophy tradition, and, as Joel Katzav has documented, speculative philosophy was intentionally pushed to the margins by abrupt editorial changes at the *Journal of Philosophy*, the *Philosophical Review*, and other prominent journals (see Katzav and Vaesen, ‘On the Emergence of American Analytic Philosophy’). This ensured there was little to no lasting influence of speculative philosophers as analytic philosophy took hold of mainstream thought in America.

However, as I will show, Adams has an intuitive and attractive metaphysics of time that he developed in connection with his theory of properties and modality. He also poses some interesting challenges that are relevant to contemporary debates. In addition, he had an indirect impact on the course of twentieth century philosophy through his efforts to cultivate a vibrant intellectual climate at Berkeley and to foster the extant connection between Berkeley and Harvard. For instance, Donald C. Williams was a product of the Berkeley-Harvard hub when Adams was at the helm. Williams subsequently influenced D. M. Armstrong and David Lewis, who both went on to reinstate metaphysics in the analytic tradition (Fisher, ‘Donald C. Williams’s Defence of Real Metaphysics’). More than that, Williams, like Adams, was an eternalist and he read the special issue *The Problem of Time* closely, in which Adams’s ‘Temporal Form and Existence’ appeared. It is not too wild to conjecture that Williams was influenced by Adams’s eternalism to some extent. These considerations alone justify an investigation of Adams’s philosophy in the literature.

Starting with his first book *Idealism and the Modern Age* (published in 1919), Adams spent much of his career applying his idealism to the nature of mind, perception, ideas, norms, reason, experience, truth, meaning, universals, causation, modality, and time. He thought of his idealism as ‘realistic’ (‘Naturalism or Idealism’, 77), hence I label it *realist*

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<sup>1</sup> For a recent article on Royce, see Parker, ‘Josiah Royce: Idealism, Transcendentalism, Pragmatism’.

*idealism*. As the name suggests, realist idealism brings together elements of both realism and idealism. When it came to the question of perception and its object, Adams, like Whitehead, was opposed to a bifurcation in nature between things in the mind and out of the mind (Whitehead, *The Concept of Nature*, 29). There are no ideas, presentations or sense-data that represent the object. Whereas Whitehead eventually posited a realm of eternal objects, Adams declared that there are no abstract essences that subsist in some eternal realm by which we know things (see also de Laguna, 'Existence and Potentiality', 160-62). Any representational theory of perception and any correspondence theory of truth implies a problematic dualism that throws up an epistemic barrier between us and the object (Adams, 'Truth, Discourse, and Reality', 186). Following Samuel Alexander (*The Basis of Realism*, 9-10), any experience is a 'compresence and meeting' of an act and object (Adams, 'Naturalism or Idealism', 73). We are in direct contact with the object or, in Adams's preferred words, some objective structure. So far these doctrines should make him a realist.<sup>2</sup>

While Adams thinks that we are directly acquainted with the objects of perception, he believes that in perceiving we bring to that perception some ideal component that interprets the object. Facts or the given, while objective, are 'shot through with theory' (Adams, 'Fact and Perspective', 205). As he sees it, this thesis puts him in the idealist camp. To be sure, he is no subjective or absolute idealist, but he disagrees with the various brands of realism on offer at the time (neo-realism, critical realism). Moreover, his theory of conscious processes is idealist, endowed with certain aspects that he owes to Royce. For Adams, each mental event (such as an idea or judgement) has two irreducible kinds of meaning: an internal and external meaning. An internal meaning is the purpose, intent or interest of the mental event imposed by the experiencer. An external meaning is the object that is the target of the mental event, that is, the content of the mental event ('The Nature and Habitat of Mind', 63-64; 'Ideas in Knowing and Willing', 29; 'Reason and Experience', 151). Meanings and values are inseparable from the facts or the given. The knower comes with interests and a purpose when engaging with the facts or the given. An existent acquires meaning in virtue of being interpreted or explained. In this process the meaning is discovered but the thing that acquires the meaning exists independently. Ideal constructions are vehicles 'through which objective meanings are disclosed' ('Truths of Existence and of Meaning', 59). Even his theory of truth and knowledge allow for the nature of things to be revealed to us but via ideal constructions. Hence, his overall theory has strong idealist elements.

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<sup>2</sup> The observation that the nature of experience is such that the mind always 'meets' an object is also found in Creighton, 'The Standpoint of Experience', 596. Adams places more emphasis on the compresence intuition, which is from Alexander. The compresence intuition is that the act and object are *together* in the same manifold. For Alexander, this implies that the mind is ontically on a par with other finite things. Thus metaphysical realism is true.

Adams's realist idealism is a late development in the Anglo-American idealist tradition. It can be seen as pushing past the idealism-realism debate, while holding on to idealist doctrines that he thought should be salvaged in the wake of the rise of realism and the pragmatist revolt. His system is intrinsically interesting and worthy of investigation. The focus in this paper is on his theory of time. The problem of time was a central concern for Adams because he took it to illustrate perfectly the problem of transcendent reference: how the mind transcends the given. In addition, he regarded time as a categorial form and so, as an objective structure, it has a special metaphysical significance. His solution epitomizes his philosophical method and unifies a number of plausible doctrines in metaphysics.

In what follows, I outline the features of Adams's metaphysics that are relevant to his theory of time and I explain his experiential analysis of temporal form, showing that B-relations are more fundamental than A-theoretic properties. I then articulate his temporal epistemology and present his response to James's specious present, which leads to the temporal boundary problem. In the conclusion, I defend actualist eternalism against two objections. My central aim is to give Adams's forgotten eternalism some airtime and show how it is relevant to contemporary debates in metaphysics.

### **Metaphysical commitments and experiential descriptions of temporal form**

In the early twentieth century, a number of American and British philosophers began debates about presentism, the growing block theory, and eternalism.<sup>3</sup> Like Alexander and Bertrand Russell, Adams defended eternalism.<sup>4</sup> In Adams's formulation, he uses a distinction between the actual and the real. The past, present and future are all real but only the present is *actual*. He is motivated to incorporate such a distinction because, like C. S. Peirce, he thought that time is a kind of modality (for discussion on Peirce, see Heath, *The Concept of Time*, 131). This leads Adams to conceive of time in connection with modality.

According to Adams's theory of modality, possibles exist objectively and are mind-independent. He says: 'We discover what is really possible; its existence does not wait upon our knowledge. The framework of the possible is set for us and not by us' ('What Makes Possibility Possible?', 19). On his view, real objective possibilities are grounded in combinations of immanent general determinables. His view would be classified today as a form of combinatorialism coupled with immanent realism about universals.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> I use contemporary terminology when I attribute theories of time to philosophers of this era.

<sup>4</sup> Alexander, *Space, Time, and Deity*, 71, 95. Russell, 'On the Experience of Time', 225; *Our Knowledge of the External World*, 125. Before Alexander or Russell, Mary Calkins argued that the nature of time is an (abstract) succession of moments bound together by an irreversible necessary connection (Calkins, 'Time as Related to Causality and to Space', 218).

<sup>5</sup> Adams further argues that fictional entities are possible: 'There is always some discoverable general feature of our world, some existing universal, ..., which makes possible the wildest creations of imagination and fancy' (Adams, 'What Makes Possibility Possible?', 18). Determinables (forms) in reality ground genuine

Adams distinguishes between continuous possibles and transcendent possibles. Continuous possibles are continuous with the actual. They are not presently experienced but can be experienced. I am currently presented with a beer can and so it is actual. The window behind me is currently an object of possible experience. Anything that is connected to the actual is a continuous possible. Transcendent possibles are not continuous with the actual. They are, basically, mere possibilities such as unmanifested powers, alternative world-histories, choices I could have made, etc. While things like talking donkeys are transcendent possibles, rising sea levels are continuous possibles. In general, the past and future are part of the trans-actual; they are both continuous with the actual. A future eclipse ‘while ... it is real now, just as the battle of Hastings is a real event, will become actual’ (‘What Makes Possibility Possible?’, 6); it will ‘become actual only at some future time’ (‘What Makes Possibility Possible?’, 7). The actual/continuous possible distinction is epistemic and relative to some perceiver:

To say that the boundary between the actual and the possible is epistemic is thus to think of both regions as belonging to the real, and the boundary line as dependent upon the observer. The continuous possible is the extended and supplemented actual, the actual expanded into and continuous with the real. (Adams, ‘What Makes Possibility Possible?’, 9)

Therefore, the notion of actual is indexical.  $x$  is actual iff  $x$  is an element of experience immediately presented.<sup>6</sup> This makes actuality a relative matter. Adams goes on to say that: ‘The actual is that fragment of the real which is presented’ (Adams, ‘Temporal Form and Existence’, 214). The actual is, therefore, situated among the modal and the temporal: ‘The actual is set in a wider context of the real which both transcends the actual and is continuous with it’ (Adams, ‘Temporal Form and Existence’, 215).

I call his version of eternalism actualist because it places emphasis on the present *being actual*, although relative to some perceiver – just like our world alone is actual from our standpoint. His theory is not actualist because everything that exists is actual; he thinks that there are things that are non-actual. Ontically speaking, the present is not privileged because it is one moment among the other real moments of the past and future. Modally speaking, the present is privileged because it is made active or is enacted relative to some perceiver (and not considered a possible). Adams’s actualist eternalism can be seen as a temporal analogue of Lewis’s modal realism (*On the Plurality of Worlds*). There

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possibilities – when we bracket other determinables with which they ‘collide’ (Adams, ‘What Makes Possibility Possible?’, 18). For a contemporary account, see Denby, ‘Generating Possibilities’.

<sup>6</sup> Compare Alexander: ‘The actual is that which we experience in sensation, what is before our minds in such a way that we are in direct contact with it, that which we have to accept and make our account with’ (‘The Reality of the Past’, 41). Adams’s indexical account of actuality anticipates Lewis’s application of this doctrine in modal metaphysics. Lewis found the theory in Arthur Prior’s work (Lewis, ‘Anselm and Actuality’, 185).

is a plurality of worlds and our world is one among many. There is a plurality of instants and this instant is one among many. The present moment and our world are actual, where other worlds and other times are non-actual although real.

Adams also formulates his theory of time in connection with his theory of properties and fundamental ontology. His theory of properties is immanent realism about universals (Adams, ‘The Relation between Form and Process’). On his view, properties are active forms that *organize* matter, stuff, or process (e.g., the given) and *express* the nature of what they organize. He sums up: ‘forms are not epiphenomena or shadows, or thin cross-sections of processes. Nor are they adventitious intrusions into processes from some transcendent world’ (‘The Relation between Form and Process’, 215). Forms are immanent in the standard sense, but they have a further intimate connection with their instances in virtue of filling the role of expressing what they organize.<sup>7</sup>

Adams’s fundamental ontology is a process ontology. There are, fundamentally speaking, processes in nature. Process is some sort of stuff subject to mass-quantification and mass nouns. Since Adams endorses a process ontology, the material that forms organize are, ultimately, processes (‘The Relation between Form and Process’, 214). Events are the individuals that are borne out of process. Citing Whitehead, Adams stresses that events are the perceivable things in nature (Adams, ‘Ideas in Knowing and Willing’, 25-26; cf. Whitehead, *The Concept of Nature*, 167). He says: ‘What we perceive in nature and in our minds, in history and in our selves, are, in any case, tissues of events’ (Adams, ‘Ideas in Knowing and Willing’, 26). Although process ontologies, such as Whitehead’s, are typically interpreted as involving a rejection of the B-theory of time, Adams combines process ontology with the B-theory of time.

For Adams, time is adjectival on events and things. This renders time a (complex) property or, as he says, a form. We can, therefore, call time a ‘temporal form’. He is interested in the most faithful way to describe time qua temporal form in experience. He asks: ‘Can we describe this universal temporal quality of things experienced in terms of a single relational quality, a single type of pattern, or is it complex, containing two or more different structures?’ (‘Temporal Form and Existence’, 206). The first answer says that time is described by, or analysed in terms of, one kind of relation, specifically the relation of before and after – i.e., the B-relation. Call this view *monism about temporal form*. The second answer says that time is described by two or more kinds of relation. This view is typically espoused as a dualism: there are B-relations and duration. Call this view *dualism about temporal form*.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Arthur E. Murphy argues that some cases in the sciences are not fully captured by the claim that forms express the nature of what they organize, presumably because the underlying structure in these cases is opaque (Murphy, ‘Review of *Studies in the Problem of Relations, Studies in the Nature of Facts, and Causality*’, 76). This sort of worry is more of an epistemic concern than a metaphysical issue. Adams would admit that in some cases we might be ignorant of the underlying structure, but this would not entail that the form in question does not play the expressing-role.

<sup>8</sup> Adams and his colleagues read McTaggart and adopted his A-series and B-series terminology.

The monist thinks that time just *is* succession, whereas the dualist thinks that time involves succession but that there is an extra element of duration. More precisely, for the monist, succession is more fundamental than duration. For the dualist, duration is more fundamental than succession.<sup>9</sup> This interpretation of the dispute fits with the picture of time that the dualist advocates. Duration as A-theoretic temporal progression entails that ‘a past event can be specified as past without reference to the temporal relation of before and after’ (Adams, ‘Temporal Form and Existence’, 206). Fundamental reality is duration. The present moment is real, non-specious, and non-successive (Mackay, ‘Succession and Duration’, 178). The dualist is committed to saying that duration exists without succession. That is, there is ‘an experience of duration from which there is lacking any before-and-after serial order of successiveness’ (Adams, ‘Temporal Form and Existence’, 207).

Adams argues that if every experience of duration is interpreted such that there is succession also, then we have not isolated a purely durational experience. A durational experience as enjoyed *appears* purely durational, but if we reflect on that experience we find phases of the given process. Those phases are temporal aspects of the process that invite B-relations into the situation. So dualism is false.

If there is a necessary connection between duration and succession, Adams reasons that succession is the more fundamental of the two. In other words, time is what I call *B-theoretic temporal form*, since at bottom it is a B-relation. (Adams does not use the label ‘B-theoretic temporal form’.) His argument is as follows:

- (P1) In any temporal experience we always find at least one B-relation.
- (P2) If so, B-relation is more fundamental than A-theoretic temporal progression.
- (C) Thus, B-relation is more fundamental than A-theoretic temporal progression.

In support of (P1), consider the example of me writing this paper. Let us grant that it is some entity that endures as a whole. Nonetheless, it endures over a period of time, and thus has phases, as Mackay accepts. Therefore, the B-relation breaks out among the phases of this process. Indeed, the B-relation breaks out for any duration, however short. What is less clear is how to argue for (P2). The thought expressed in (P1) is that the B-relation is pervasive (and that A-theoretic temporal progression is *not* pervasive). As Adams says: ‘It would be the pervasive abstract temporal form of whatever perdures and persists’ (‘Temporal Form and Existence’, 207).<sup>10</sup> The fact that the B-relation is pervasive

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<sup>9</sup> L. Susan Stebbing interprets Adams’s view in this way, when she says that Adams insists that ‘what is fundamental is the serial order of before and after’ (Stebbing, ‘Review of *The Problem of Time*’, 485).

<sup>10</sup> Adams is the first to use the word ‘perdures’, as far as I know. In analytic metaphysics, the terms ‘perdures’ and ‘perdurance’ were introduced by David Lewis (*On the Plurality of Worlds*, 202), who adapted them from Mark Johnston (*Particulars and Persistence*, 80, 126). The modern usage is different to Adams’s. Johnston and Lewis think of perdurance as one way of persisting for individuals. An individual that persists by perduring does so by having temporal parts. For Adams, the word ‘perdures’ applies to

is supposed to entail that it is more fundamental than A-theoretic temporal progression, as per (P2). But for the argument to go through it should specifically entail that B-theoretic temporal form is more fundamental than A-theoretic temporal progression *as existing without any B-relations*. If succession crops up wherever you look, then it has the kind of metaphysical significance that places it at the centre of our experience of time.<sup>11</sup> If duration is necessarily connected to succession, or if duration is successive in some way, then A-theorists like Mackay cannot appeal to duration independent of succession to explain temporal experience (Adams, ‘Temporal Form and Existence’, 207). Hence, the B-series is logically prior to the A-series. Adams is clearly a B-theorist, but his argument goes beyond issues of tense. In arguing that the B-relation is the core feature of time he rejects theories (such as presentism) that involve a basic notion of duration or of dynamism.

### Temporal epistemology and the given

Adams constructs his theory of time in relation to what is given in experience. He is concerned with such questions as ‘how do we arrive at knowledge of the past and the future, especially if events and things at those times are not given in experience?’. His preoccupation with the experiential is a window to metaphysics. In contemporary debates, this consideration, particularly in an epistemic guise, continues to have an impact. The problem of how we know that it is now now, sometimes called the ‘Present Problem’ (Bourne, ‘When Am I? A Tense Time for Some Tense Theorists?’), is one instance of this kind of consideration. A key move in arguments derived from the Present Problem is that we have this piece of knowledge and we know that we have this piece of knowledge. Therefore, our theory should account for these facts. What we are doing is investigating the epistemological consequences of a metaphysics of time to find out whether the epistemic situation we are put in conforms to prior knowledge and is trouble-free. Adams is thinking along similar lines when he queries our knowledge of past and future events in light of the given. For this reason his theory of temporal knowledge can prod us to consider whether current theories of time should provide a temporal epistemology, just like theories of modality are nowadays accompanied with a modal epistemology.

A plea for temporal epistemology can ask for a number of explananda:

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universals. A universal perdures throughout its life in some event or object. He contrasts perdurance with persistence, where persistence refers to what we call endurance. His use of persistence applies to objects or continuant things.

<sup>11</sup> Karl Britton points out that Adams’s claim that the B-relation is pervasive is not grounded solely in experience or empirical observation (Britton, ‘New Books: *The Problem of Time*’, 88). It is, in fact, an a priori truth. This merely shows that Adams is no crude empiricist. He allows reflection or reason (i.e., reflective experience) to uncover the nature of fundamental organising principles of (primary) experience such as time (Adams, ‘The Nature and Validity of the Causal Principle’, 209). Such a priori necessary truths can have an experiential source.

1. an analysis of temporal knowledge.
2. an account of how we come to possess temporal knowledge.
3. a firm foundation for our temporal knowledge in response to:
  - a. scepticism
  - b. facts about the given, within an empiricist framework
  - c. some criterion of truthmaking
  - d. or ...

Adams is concerned mostly with (2) and (3b). He poses the following dilemma ('Temporal Form and Existence', 208-9). Start with the project of describing the given in a strict empiricist framework, where we are epistemically stuck in the given with very few resources. Either past and future are presented in experience or not. If past and future are presented, they are present instead of existing in the past or future. If they are not presented, epistemic access is denied to events at those times. The lack of epistemic access to non-present events implies that we cannot know any past or future events plus it indicates something stronger, namely that we cannot *say* anything about past or future events (within the current empiricist framework). Even though we might stand in a causal relation to the past in that some past event is the cause of a present effect, we are not acquainted directly with that past event. The problem is analogous to other epistemic access problems. How can we know abstract objects such as numbers and sets? How can we know possible worlds and individuals in possible worlds? Abstract objects and possibilia are beyond our ken. (You might think that the past is causally accessible in a way in which abstracta and possibilia cannot, but through the lens of this impoverished empiricism all three kinds of thing are in the same epistemic boat.)

One source of the dilemma is the few resources of the highly constrained empiricism that Adams constructed the dilemma with. And that is part of his point. The solution, he thinks, is to remind ourselves that past and future knowledge require further resources such as inference and ideal construction. Analogously, knowledge of abstracta and possibilia require similar or the same resources. The way time is constructed ideally is based on resources we have in the present. To build a foundation of temporal knowledge we need to know more about the material that we are working with, the resources that ground temporal knowledge. This leads Adams to ask about the nature of the present. He specifies two conceptions:

- A) Specious present: 'any present is a specious present unless it belongs to a temporal series which includes past and future' ('Temporal Form and Existence', 210).
- B) Real present: any present is real 'only when it is viewed as falling between a real past and a real future' ('Temporal Form and Existence', 210).

(A) is not James's specious present. The kind of specious present described by (A) is one in which any present moment is enjoyed on its own, enjoyed from within, with no temporal boundaries, and with no contrast with any past or future. Adams has in mind the kind of present that Santayana describes in the following passage:

A being that should have no external temporal relations and no locus in physical time would be *dateless*. Thus every given essence and every specious present is dateless, internally considered, and taken transcendently, that is, as a station for viewing other things or a unit framing them in. Though dateless, the specious present is not timeless, and an instant, though timeless, is not dateless. (Santayana, *Scepticism and Animal Faith*, 270)

The problem with (A) is that it does not provide the resources to build an ideal construction of temporal knowledge. Without temporal concepts we cannot acquire notions of temporal belief or temporal judgement. The solution is to 'apply a temporal form to the totality of what is presented' (Adams, 'Temporal Form and Existence', 213). The appropriate temporal form is the B-relation. When the B-relation is applied to the presented actual the B-relation *transforms* the presented actual into the 'temporal present', that is, into the real present.

If the B-relation plays a crucial role in grounding temporal knowledge, its epistemic function in temporal epistemology lends support to the doctrine that the B-series is more fundamental than and logically prior to the A-series. But Adams has to unpack the proposal that B-theoretic temporal is the foundation of temporal knowledge. This is where he draws another analogy between time and modality. In 'What Makes Possibility Possible?', he argues that modal knowledge is due to discernment of universals – both simple and complex universals. That is, we discern combinations of universals to grasp various possibilities. In the temporal case, we grasp the operation of a (structural) universal, namely, the B-relation, which in turn serves to ground temporal knowledge. Adams writes: 'our knowledge of the actually presented as a temporal present is likewise the application to the whole of the presented of a temporal form' ('Temporal Form and Existence', 213).

In both cases we grasp universals, which are general entities that are or can be multiply instanced. We discern the principled behaviour and nature of universals so as to know about times outside what is present. Analogously, someone like Lewis accepts that we formulate general principles – such as a priori principles of recombination – to serve as a foundation of our knowledge of other worlds (Lewis, *On the Plurality of Worlds*, 114).<sup>12</sup> We do not know specific facts about a particular possible world. Rather, we know

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<sup>12</sup> Lewis has an object-oriented nominalist understanding of principles of recombination, where we imagine objects such as a unicorn and a dragon spatiotemporally together. This way of understanding principles of recombination can be translated into talk of universals being instantiated in co-existing things or events.

that *some* possible world contains, say, a talking donkey, via principles of recombination. Analogously, temporal knowledge is not about knowing how I know some particular fact about what I ate for breakfast at Mickey's Diner five years ago. Temporal knowledge is about knowing the general structure of time. We can extract a further analogy: when we reflect on our modal concepts we realize that they make reference somehow to other worlds. I judge that this actual thing in my world has a modal feature but then I recognise that this feature is understood in terms of something (a counterpart) in another world. Analogously, when we reflect on our temporal concepts we realize that they make reference somehow to other times. I judge that this present event is situated in a larger temporal manifold.

So, if we apply B-theoretic temporal form to the presented actual, it reveals 'a structure which transcends the actual. It discloses the presented as lying between a real past and a real future' ('Temporal Form and Existence', 214). 'The only time that is actual is present time. In apprehending it as present we also apprehend a nonpresented, nonactual, but real past and future' ('Temporal Form and Existence', 214). The core of Adams's argument, I suspect, is lurking in the background of Williams's defence of eternalism, when the latter asserts that: 'to remember the past and expect the future *is* to believe in a real past and a real future' (Williams, 'The Nature of Time', 180-1). The similarity in their line of thinking suggests that Adams influenced Williams, even if Williams did not acknowledge it. As Williams goes on to argue:

The proposition that my momentary experience, with its memories and anticipations, is embedded in a real series of my earlier and later experiences, to say nothing of a vast universe of events, including other people's experience, extending beyond all my experience, is so nearly the *only* proposition which explains anything about my momentary experience, or anything else, that to reject it is to reject the very idea of explanation, of understanding, and of knowledge itself. (Williams, 'The Nature of Time', 181)

The payoff of Adams's account is that we explain how we come to possess temporal knowledge and offer a foundation of temporal knowledge under a restriction to the present.

Stebbing objects that Adams's use of the word 'transforms' is unclear and that there are most likely problems with it (Stebbing, 'Review of *The Problem of Time*', 485). She never elaborated on what those difficulties might be. But the challenge is a fair one to pose: what does it mean to say that the B-relation 'transforms' the presented actual into the real present? The notion of transformation is a technical one, which needs to be clearly specified. We can avoid the charge of obscurity by interpreting Adams as making a claim about the inner rationalist workings of experience. His realist idealism is at work in this explanation. It is part and parcel of his realist idealism that experience is a 'revelation

of the real' ('Reason and Experience', 147) and that reason is a process whereby 'the mind transcends the immediately given' ('Reason and Experience', 159). When the presented actual is transformed into the temporal present he just means a realization of that fact in reflective experience. The realisation is not inferential. Rather, it is a change of perspective. Adams writes:

The present alone is given, presented, but we could not know it as present except by reference to its position within a wider series including past and future, which are not given. Were they given, they would be present. To view the present as occupying a temporal position is already to have transcended the present. The view requires a perspective wider than any which is accessible within the boundaries of presented and present. ('Temporal Form and Existence', 211)

To be clear, he is proposing an epistemology according to which we have knowledge *ab initio* of something more expansive than the present, more expansive than a simple thin given like Locke's simple ideas or Hume's impressions. Indeed, Adams's account shows us that, in general, the given is not known in isolation from what is not given ('What Makes Possibility Possible?', 4). The present moment is perceived as present in the context of other times that are not given. We perceive an edge that points to the past and the future, which reveals the idea of a moving present. This perception of an edge, Adams claims, is non-inferential ('Reason and Experience', 161). In apprehending the present there is an implied reference to a larger temporal context in which the present is embedded. So when we consider what is apprehended, that is, what is immediately given (the present moment), we realize it is incomplete. Our experience reveals features of reality that are not given. In apprehending time I am not merely aware of a basic datum of duration, nor do I read into a datum of duration foreign concepts or meanings from myself or my interests. Instead:

It is the awareness and recognition of what the data themselves are, not as immediately given, but as continuously supplementing and completing the given. This supplementing and interpretation of the given comes from the side of the object. Space and time are indeed 'ideal constructions', but they are not for that reason arbitrary and subjective. (Adams, 'Naturalism or Idealism', 79; cf. 'The Nature and Habitat of Mind', 60; cf. 'Truths of Existence and of Meaning', 60)

This mode of knowing is distinct from 'a literal transcription of what is actually experienced' and distinct from 'a sheer inference from the stuff of presented experience' ('Temporal Form and Existence', 214). It is not as if we *infer* knowledge of temporal facts or temporal structure from the present. It is not as if all times are given and we describe what is given in experience. Instead our awareness transcends the given from the very

outset. This is a basic epistemic fact that we presuppose and use in temporal experience and acknowledge on reflection. Adams does not rely on inference to secure temporal knowledge. After all, any kind of inference can be probed so as to uncover a problematic dualism or bifurcation between what is presented and what is not. He avoids this issue by arguing that a real present along with a real past and real future are accessible to us in experience, which makes the connection more intimate than inference, without placing the entire content of experience in the present. Hence, the aforementioned ‘transformation’ is best described as a shift of perspective in reflective experience.

### James’s specious present and the temporal boundary problem

On Adams’s view, the real present is situated between the real past and real future. We know this fact in virtue of applying the B-relation to the entirety of what is presented. However, we do not merely apply the B-relation to the entirety of what is presented. We also employ the B-relation, Adams says, ‘as an instrument in the internal analysis of the presented’ (‘Temporal Form and Existence’, 215). The presented, in other words, is James’s specious present. If James’s specious present is really specious, then Adams is not entitled to his analysis. His description of the present would be of something unreal and it would be unsuitable for explaining temporal experience.

Adams, Royce, Santayana and others interpreted James as offering a *psychological* description of the present. The psychological description of the present is, to use James’s metaphor, something like a horse saddle, with a pommel (back-side) and cantle (front-side); and we sit in a perch position on the saddle (James, *Principles of Psychology*, 642). Our experience of the present – even when reduced to the minimum of awareness – is not of an instantaneous moment. Rather, it is of a duration block that displays a thick temporal spread, with B-theoretic divisions.<sup>13</sup> James’s specious present is specious, it was argued, because this conception of the present is of something unreal; all of it cannot exist.

- (P1) When  $t1$  exists  $t2$  does not exist, and vice-versa (because  $t1$  is earlier than  $t2$ ).
- (P2) Duration block  $D$  contains  $t1$  and  $t2$ , either in experience or in nature.
- (C1) Thus,  $D$  is impossible.
- (C2) So, James’s specious present is unreal.

$D$  is impossible because for something to exist all of it must exist at the same time. In the experiential case, ‘if we are to apprehend any relation, the related terms must be simultaneously discriminated’ (Adams, ‘Temporal Form and Existence’, 217); but  $t1$  and  $t2$  are not able to be simultaneously discriminated;  $t1$  and  $t2$  do not exist at the same time, as per (P1). There is a failure of grasping in a single act of perception the entirety of

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. Royce, *The World and the Individual*, 130.

D. In the metaphysical case, the issue concerns the event itself. Consider some event  $E$  with two phases  $p1$  and  $p2$ . For  $E$  to exist all of  $E$ 's phases must exist together. If  $p1$  is earlier than  $p2$ , then  $p2$  cannot exist at the same time as  $p1$ . Thus,  $E$  does not exist.

Adams rejects this argument. The motivation behind (P1) is the assumption that the B-relation plays the key role in determining the existence conditions of events. But, he argues, it is not clear that temporal form has such an important role in ontology. Temporal form may play a role in determining when something is *present*. Thus, 'the earlier is not present when the later is' ('Temporal Form and Existence', 217). On this point Royce and Adams are in agreement, when Royce says that the other notes of the melody are 'either *no longer* or *not yet*' (*The World and the Individual*, 145). But this assertion is distinct from the claim that if one event is earlier than another the first does not *exist* when the second does. That would be to conflate what is present with what exists, which is question-begging. Moreover, it would be odd to say that something exists relative to one perceiver and does not exist relative to another perceiver, although there is nothing wrong with saying that something is present relative to one perceiver and not present relative to another perceiver. Since the argument fails, we do not have to accept the claim that James's specious present is unreal. For Adams, James's specious present is real.

When we recognize that B-theoretic temporal form does not play the role of ontology, the restrictions on what kind of events exist opens up. Start with a short sound  $S$ . It is an event. It has phases and so the B-relation applies to it. Intuitively,  $S$  exists, plus its phases exist together (for how can  $S$  exist without all of its parts?). If there are such short events as  $S$  and if the B-relation plays a temporal structuring role only, it follows that there is no ontic restriction on the existence of longer events such as a 90 min football match. Adams writes:

If an occurrence so nearly momentary as a flash of lightning exists, then there is nothing which can be drawn from the purely temporal relation of earlier and later to prevent one from ascribing existence to any occurrence so long as it is one occurrence, a single individual event. ('Temporal Form and Existence', 219)

You might reply that the battle of Waterloo is no longer occurring. The battle of Waterloo does not exist. It is a constituent event (of the Napoleonic wars) that is now over. It exists only when it occurs. However, this same reasoning applies to all events. Consider  $S$  again. It has the same temporal structure as the battle of Waterloo. So if the battle of Waterloo does not exist, then  $S$  does not exist. But  $S$  does exist. Hence, the battle of Waterloo exists.

One way to defend Adams is to interpret him as offering an argument from vagueness.<sup>14</sup> Adams's argument from vagueness is as follows. Assume that existence is not vague: an event occurs or it does not occur. (Such an assumption is also standard in contemporary formulations of the argument.) Then stipulate that there is some temporal condition *C* that states that event *e1* exists and *e2* does not exist. However, any temporal condition is vague, because we can construct a continuum of events with increasing and slightly similar temporal length. It would be arbitrary to say that a certain temporal length grounds the existential cut-off point for something being an event. Therefore, we should reject temporal condition *C*.

Adams has effectively posed a challenge for all theories of time, which I call *the temporal boundary problem*. The presentist has to give an account of the temporal spread of the present moment. What are the temporal boundaries of the present, according to the presentist?<sup>15</sup> Duration block *D* has some temporal complexity, however minimal. This is what our experience of the present moment indicates to us. But the presentist places an ontic restriction on what events exist. Something must fall within the duration of what exists to be an event. Thus a short sound event or a lightning flash exists, but a much longer event such as the fall of Han dynasty does not. This invites us to ask: what is the factor that grounds the demarcation between these two kinds of events? The vagueness argument may be employed to show that any factor specified by the presentist is ultimately arbitrary.

In reply, the presentist might say that the present is as long as the duration of existence. But still an explanation should be given as to why a certain event we experience is in but other events are out. If we reflect on the B-theoretic structure of the specious present, we will find an initial moment that has nothing before it and a moment at the other end that has nothing after it. But why have these specific ontic cut-offs? If this is a brute fact, then the theory incurs a cost that eternalism does not. If the presentist includes things that are intuitively of the past in specifying the temporal chunkiness of the duration block, then the theory is no longer presentist. The present has swelled up so as to include some past things. So, either the theory is forced to include past objects or the theory dwindles the present down to an instantaneous moment of existence that is shorter than any present experience we enjoy. Both consequences would be hard to accept.

The growing block theorist is faced with a similar problem. If the past and present exist but the future does not, we can ask: what is the boundary between a present event and a future event? The growing block theorist will have to say that for on-going events such as the pandemic there are phases that do not exist; again, it would be arbitrary to

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<sup>14</sup> This style of argument is used by analytic metaphysicians in the service of unrestricted mereological composition and four-dimensionalism (Lewis, *On the Plurality of Worlds*, 212-13; Sider, *Four-dimensionalism*, 120-40; for discussion, see Miller, 'Blocking the Path from Vagueness to Four Dimensionalism').

<sup>15</sup> The temporal boundary problem can be traced to Royce, who invites the presentist to 'state how long his real present of the time-world is' (Royce, *The World and the Individual*, 128).

declare where the ontic cut off point is using temporal concepts. If there is some difference between the past and the present, according to the growing block theorist, e.g., the past is dead and the present is not (Forrest, 'The Real but Dead Past'), then the temporal boundary problem arises between the past and the present. Where, temporally speaking, is the boundary between the past and present? On the growing block theory, we would have an event with some phases of a radically different kind to others, plus the division would be ad hoc and arbitrary. Perhaps, the growing block theorist could posit a hyper-time that determines which events are really present, but this posit would introduce extra complexity.

The eternalist's response to the temporal boundary problem is that all events of whatever temporal span exist. There are no temporal boundaries that entail an ontic claim that events of a certain kind do not exist. In one sense the problem does not arise for the eternalist. However, on Adams's eternalism, the present is actual. Given this commitment, he needs to offer some story about the temporal boundary of the present or of any present. He does this by interpreting the question as a problem about what makes something an individual event, where an event can be of any temporal span. An event, after all, occurs in a present. It occurs in a present that becomes past when the event has finished.

According to the subjectivist proposal, the boundaries are set by some perceiver's specious present. This implies that there is no natural division among events. The actuality of an event is entirely relative to some perceiver. According to the objectivist proposal, the boundaries of events are intrinsic properties of the event. It seems that Adams should favour subjectivism, because, on his view, what is actual is indexical (and also because he is some kind of idealist). However, experience, he thinks, reveals that there are events with natural boundaries. So he is motivated to specify some kind of property that grounds the natural boundaries of an event as well as objectively demarcates and individuates certain events from others. Recall that his idealism is realist. He continues:

There is something that perdures throughout a succession of next-to-next moments and constitutes them phases or aspects of an individual event. When an event is viewed as an arbitrarily selected slab of process, this perduring somewhat is neglected and abstracted from. The event is regarded solely under the rubric of succession, of before and after. The event is dissolved into process. ('Temporal Form and Existence', 223)

The 'perduring somewhat' is a universal that organizes chunks of process into an identifiable event. These universals are of a special kind and serve a unique purpose. Following Bernard Bosanquet, Adams calls them 'general schemes' (Bosanquet, *Philosophical Theory of the State*, 151). Adams specifies what he means by general scheme:

I mean anything in the shape of a governing tendency, something dominant and pervasive, whose determining presence through the temporal sequence makes it more than a mere temporal conjunction of otherwise loose and undetermined events. ('The Nature and Validity of the Causal Principle', 226)

Adams adds:

An event is characterized by the operative presence, throughout a span of duration, of a determining pattern whose perdurance binds into an individual event what otherwise would be merely successive moments of a continuous process. ('Temporal Form and Existence', 223)

These general schemes, I suggest, are natural properties (Lewis, 'New Work for a Theory of Universals'). Thus, for any event  $E$ ,  $E$  has some natural property  $N$ . Since Adams believes in immanent realism, these natural properties are sparse universals. Let us call these general schemes *event-universals*.

Because the complexity, diversity, and plurality of events in nature are manifold, there is not just one layer of sparse universals, discoverable by physics, say. Some events such as the French Revolution are at the level of society and the natural property that governs it is a social universal. Such an event did not happen overnight. This event comprises shorter events such as the Fall of the Bastille. This event has some governing universal that endows it with its identity; this governing universal organizes the parts of the event and determines how inclusive the event is. Since these event-universals are natural properties, they carve reality at its joints. Presumably, they do so in such a determinate way that there are no vague boundaries to any event. Interestingly, Adams thinks that natural properties come in degrees. When he elaborates on the relation between event and process, he says:

It often happens, though not always, that the more inclusive a single event is, the more dilute and formal becomes the defining principle [i.e., the natural property] which marks it off as an individual occurrence. At the limit of such dilution, an event melts into process, flux, mere successiveness. ('Temporal Form and Existence', 225)

As this passage suggests, a less natural property operates on more inclusive events. A more natural property operates on less inclusive events. However, if there are degrees of naturalness, there should be some allowance for vagueness somewhere in some cases. Adams does not explicitly discuss this, but I think one plausible proposal is that for some (but not all) highly diluted event-universals there might be some semantic indeterminacy or semantic indecision encoded in their profiles whereby it is indeterminate whether some

portion of process is included or not. This would not entail that the portion of process vaguely exists. The vagueness boils down to whether the event-universal vaguely expresses or vaguely refers to a boundary or not.

This constitutes Adams's reply to the temporal boundary problem. The gist of his response is that there are non-temporal components (event-universals) that set the boundaries of any present. Perhaps, the presentist or the growing block theorist could incorporate event-universals into their ontology, but more work is needed to fill out such an adaptation, given the different ontology of time to Adams's eternalism and any other metaphysical commitments non-eternalists might have. Non-eternalists will need to complete this task before a final evaluation of their theories can be made. Lastly, the temporal boundary problem is not decisive. It should be seen as an invitation for us to elaborate on our view about the temporal boundaries of the present. As we saw in Adams's case, any response would unveil further aspects to one's metaphysics of time or bring in other metaphysical commitments. I shall leave it to others to fill out their account.

### Conclusion

In debates about time in the early twentieth century Adams's theory of time is an interesting and distinctive development of eternalism. Like many of his contemporaries, experience was the starting point of philosophical theorising (for what else can we theorize with?). From this starting point he arrived at his own version of eternalism that he filled out systematically as a package deal that interacted fruitfully with his theory of properties, modality, and events and processes. Throughout I have given mostly positive exposition and a sympathetic treatment of actualist eternalism. I have also extracted two lessons for current debates about time: a plea for temporal epistemology and the temporal boundary problem. There are, of course, a number of problems for Adams's theory of time, which I shall deal with briefly.

The first issue concerns the ultimate status of actuality. Adams says that actuality is indexical and he relates the concept explicitly to experiencers. But he says that events have actuality independently:

The actuality, occurrence, and presentness which they once had is gone forever. But that they were once actual is no consequence of anything now imputed to them by us from the standpoint of our actual present. They had that actuality in their own right, and this is just what we mean when we speak of them as past. ('Temporal Form and Existence', 224)

This quotation appears to indicate a conflict between actuality being relative and being objective. How can Adams have it both ways? One answer is that when some chunk of process  $P$  instantiates some general scheme  $N$  some event  $E$  exists. Drawing from his

realist idealism and, more specifically, from the distinction between internal and external meaning, we can think of *N* as the ‘internal meaning’ of *E*, from *E*’s perspective. *N* encodes the intent and purpose of *E*, but *N* also ensures the actuality of *E*. The actuality of *E* is relative to *N*. In other words, from *E*’s perspective its elements, which are organized by *N*, are actual. In this sense *E* has its own actuality, just like we have our own actuality from our standpoint. So, on this interpretation, Adams does not commit himself to a moving spotlight of actuality. Otherwise his theory would imply a disjointed dualism about actuality. Just like our ideas infect some given fact such that facts are ‘shot through with theory’, so too the event is tainted with some idealist element in virtue of its general scheme. This is a consistent application of realist idealism because a perceiver may grasp the general scheme of an event and thereby understand the event, its boundaries, and other temporal features.

The second issue concerns the passage of time. Adams says such things as this future event *will* be actual and this past event *was* actual, which suggests some basic tense and absolute becoming, at least at the level of events. In addition, when he speaks about events being cut from process he refers to ‘the continuous flow of process’ (‘Temporal Form and Existence’, 222, 223). Surely, this means that there is a fundamental flow of time?

Not exactly. B-theoretic temporal form is ‘the determining form of process’ (‘Temporal Form and Existence’, 222). ‘Unbroken continuity’ is ‘the characteristic earmark of process’ (‘Temporal Form and Existence’, 222). But it does not follow that there is some ultimate flow of time or flux in time. Any talk of time passing is another way of expressing either the idea of some B-theoretic ordering of process or some structured organization of some event and its constituent events. Any perceived passage would arise from the patterns of event-universals operating on chunks of process. When we say some event *E* becomes actual *E* becomes actual relative to certain perceivers. Therefore, passage understood as perceived passage of traversed actuality is accounted for in terms of perceivers. If you asked for some further characterisation of passage at the level of process, Adams would say that process is primitive, which is precisely where explanation ends. Nothing else can be said of process besides its B-theoretic characterization. To probe further would rely on the mistaken presupposition that time is either substantival or time plays a foundational role in determining what exists. As we have seen, he argues against both presuppositions.

I conclude that Adams’s theory of time is defensible and should be considered as one plausible version of eternalism in debates about time in the early twentieth century. It unifies a number of metaphysical theories so as to package time in connection with modality, properties, events and processes. The package deal is worth considering further and his approach to time should prompt contemporary metaphysicians to think about the

importance of supplying a temporal epistemology and solving the temporal boundary problem.<sup>16</sup>

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