**Temporal Passage Demystified**

**1. Identifying the Phenomenon**

Suppose we set out to describe the passing scene. Singling out an unremarkable portion we observe: Mary kneels; Mary sits; Mary stands; Mary jumps. We have described the passing scene. More exactly, we have described a scene that passes. But we have not captured the *passing* of the scene. I propose that the only additional item required to capture the passing of the scene is this: Mary kneels; *and then* Mary sits; *and then* Mary stands. Succession is what makes our scene and time pass. Schematically, I propose that time passes iff: P, and then Q for any tensed P and Q. When Mary kneels and then sits, that constitutes a passing scene because Mary kneels—present tense—and then she sits—again, present tense. Just to have a label, I will call this the dynamic succession account of passage. The account of temporal passage enables a straightforward and appealing explanation of the connection between temporal passage, persistence, and change, which I elaborate here. With its emphasis on both tense and succession, the view combines while rejecting elements of A-theoretic (tense focused) and B-theoretic (succession focused) theories of time. I explain how this theory of temporal passage plausibly combines and rejects elements of each theory.

Theories of temporal passage, like philosophical theories generally, should be guided by examples that supposedly illustrate the phenomenon. Unfortunately, too often, the examples that have guided theories of temporal passage make the phenomenon out to be mystical and mysterious. Bradford Skow’s recent book-length examination of passage begins by citing a scene from Dylan Thomas’s play “Under Milk Wood.” Dew is falling just before dawn and the “First Voice” tells us “Time passes. Listen. Time passes” (2015: 1). What First Voice is describing may well be the passage of time. But one feels as if one will not have done justice to it unless one has identified it with something that is a Big Deal. We should avoid the obscure if possible and seek the common. Beginning one’s account of temporal passage with the example of pre-dawn dew falling is like beginning one’s account of knowledge with the intricacies of God’s atemporal knowledge of our post-mortal destiny. The concept I have of temporal passage is one I share with my 8-year-old daughter. The phenomenon is hard to single out for analysis because it is so ubiquitous. As you read and as I speak these words, it happens, and happens, and happens. Since passage phenomena are all around us every day, we would be much better served taking our cue from those more common ones.

As we try to understand its nature, our folk wisdom about passage is in some ways helpful and in some ways deeply misleading. Time is said to pass like a flowing river. To what extent is this true? How do the waters of a river flow? It’s quite simple: the waters are *first* here, *and then* there, *and then* there. So understood, in my judgment, the flowing of a river is comfortably an instance of the passing schema, i.e., P and then Q. To that extent the analogy is enlightening. But a river is also a *substance* undergoing a change. In what way could the passage of time be like that? One is tempted to suppose that time is a substance like the river undergoing a change like flowing. There ought to be some time substance. And it ought to pass by being some way at one time and then a different way a different time.

The truth is far from this. Time does pass like a river flowing but only insofar as the flowing of a river *illustrates* the passage of time. Time passes like a river flowing in that a river flowing is an example of time passing. It is as if one were to say that God’s love for his creatures is like a mother’s love for her children. That may be true just because a mother’s love for her children is an instance of the universal that is God’s love for his creatures. The flowing of a river elucidates the nature of temporal passage because it is a particularly dramatic example of time passing. According to the theory here, time passes when a river flows in the quite mundane sense that the waters of the river are first here and then there. The flowing of a river illustrates passage just because it illustrates succession.

**2. Persistence, Change, and Passage**

The dynamic succession theory of passage enables a plausible account of the intimate connection between passage, persistence, and change. The view entails that change implies passage, and that persistence also implies passage. Theories of passage have often supposed the converse, namely that passage involves change. The view that passage involves variation in the so-called A-properties is an example. According to Ned Markosian (1992), time passes because an event (and events generally) is first very future, and then less future, and then present, and then past, and so on. That is a case of change. Change involves the successive having of incompatible properties. Being future and present are incompatible. When an event is first future and then present, it exemplifies incompatible properties successively.

Change generally requires persistence (Haslanger 2003). Mary cannot change from sitting to standing unless she exists throughout. An event cannot change from being future to being present unless it exists throughout. Something persists if it exists and then (still) exists. That is an instance of the passage schema. In this case, P and then Q, where Q = P.

This conception of the connection between passage, change, and persistence has an illustrious pedigree. In the earliest sustained examination of passage in the analytic tradition, C. D. Broad seems to assert the same connection between the three concepts. Broad asserts that “qualitative change involves absolute [i.e., temporal] becoming, and . . . absolute becoming is [also] involved in mere continuance without qualitative change” (1938/1976: vol. 2, 281). A bit of caution is appropriate here, though. As is so often the case with discussions of passage that do not dwell on examples, I am not very confident that Broad’s absolute becoming is my passage.

**3. Dynamic Succession and A-Theoretic Passage**

Marcus Aurelius said time flowed like a river specifically because events flow, like the waters of a river, from future to present to past (1904: 32). Past, present, and future are known as the A-characteristics. Probably the majority of views of passage have identified the phenomenon with some variation in how things are with respect to whether they are future, present, or past. According to McTaggart, “The movement of time consists in the fact that later and later terms [or events] pass into the present, or—which is the same fact expressed in another way—that presentness passes to later and later terms” (1927/1968: vol. 2, 10).[[1]](#footnote-1) The dynamic succession theory says that what makes time pass is basically succession, not past, present, and future. How have the A-theories gone so wrong? Notice for one that the theory advocated here is not so far removed from most A-theories. These theories seem to need succession to make the passage process go. How is it supposed to work that later events *pass* into the present? How does presentness *pass* from an earlier event to a later event? McTaggart’s account leaves the concept undefined. Passage here sounds an awful lot like succession. The later event is *first* future *and then* present. And presentness seems to attach to an earlier event *before* it attaches to a later one. Indeed, Markosian’s (1992: 835) A-theoretic theory of passage makes it explicit that time passes because events are distantly future, *and then* less future, *and then* present and so on. It is succession that makes the process go.

A-theories often assert that passage takes place because the unique properties of past, present, and future—or some subset thereof—pass from one time or event to another. If events or times had A-properties, and transitioned with respect to having such properties, I would agree that was passage. What I hear when I hear that presentness passes from one moment to the next is just that presentness *first* inheres in one moment *and then* in the next. If passage is just succession, then there is no disagreement so far. Where the A-theories seemingly part from the dynamic succession account is that many circumstances that appear to involve passage on the latter do not involve passage on the former. Mary is sitting and then Mary is standing. There is no hint that that circumstance requires that something have some property of pastness, presetness, or futurity. I do not have a firm view that there is no A-property involved when Mary is sitting. If there is such a property, then again the A-theory does not appear conflict with the theory offered here. There is passage in Mary’s shape because the relevant A-property is successively involved. If past, present, or future are *not* intermediaries in Mary’s sitting and then standing, then it happens sometimes that time passes even though A-properties are not involved. I’m comfortable with where this dialectic would leave me. The A-theorist may believe that when Mary is sitting and then standing, A-properties play no role. The A-theorist may further deny that there is any passage when Mary (present tense) sits and then (present tense) stands. This it seems to me is a rock bottom disagreement about what kind of phenomena illustrate passage. If Mary’s sitting and then standing does not qualify under the A-theorist’s understanding, I’ll put my money on my concept.

**4. Dynamic Succession and B-Theoretic Passage**

Those sympathetic to a dynamic conception of time will complain that passage is not succession because succession is static. If passage is just succession, where is the whoosh and whizz (Falk 2003)? Fans of dynamic time will say they have heard this story before. Time is a manifold of events and times in the deepest metaphysical sense co-existing within a single dimension. In another way, the events are supposedly separate because they are successive and located at distinct times. Is that all I’m saying?

The dynamic succession theory of passage does have a superficial resemblance with B-theoretic accounts of passage. Both appeal to succession as the engine of passage. But the resemblance is misleading. B-theoretic passage is not real passage because B-theoretic succession is not real succession. Succession is not some relation that connects co-existing entities (see Craig 2000: 235). If it were, succession would be no help in making the world go. Succession makes things go precisely because, when it takes place, what happens ceases and gives way to what happens next. That kind of ceasing and giving way can only obtain with a relationship in which something happens and then doesn’t happen. Once one gets to the bottom of the theory, B-theoretic succession is not like that.

Succession is passage because it at least allows genuine transition. The core disagreement between dynamic succession and the B-theory is the latter’s denial of tense. Dynamic succession asserts that the Ps and Qs of the theory are irreducibly tensed. The B-theory’s atoms are tenseless. Speaking in our irreducibly tensed language, “P and then Q” enables transition because, when P, not-Q, and when Q, not-P. The B-theorist will provide a different gloss on a similar situation. Mary is sitting at one time and standing at another. When Mary is sitting she is not simultaneously standing. But she is standing elsewhere in time. The dynamic succession holds that Mary is not standing anywhere in time. And that is because there is (present tense) nowhere else in time for Mary to stand. This requirement that passage/succession at least *may* occur between items that do not occur together is a close cousin of the longstanding insistence that passage imply change.[[2]](#footnote-2)

This requirement rules out tenseless (i.e., B-theoretic) theories of passage. According to these views, passage is succession—perhaps succession as such or succession plus change. For example, time passes because one event is before another.[[3]](#footnote-3) Or time passes because O is (tenselessly) F at T1 and O is (tenselessly) G at T2, for incompatible F and G. These accounts do not satisfy the transition requirement.  The terms of the succession relation happen together. To see this, consider an example from Skow (2015: 35).  Remember that we are subtracting tense as we speak. The clock indicates 8 at T1 and then the clock indicates 10 at T2.  Speaking tenselessly, the clock indicates 8 at T1.  And, still speaking tenselessly, the clock indicates 10 at T2.  Therefore, it is possible—indeed actual—that succession and thus passage takes place where P and then Q, where (P & Q).   Succession *never* makes what is coming into being replace what has been. The two items, although supposedly successive, exist in perfect equipoise with each other.

One can see in another way how a block theory of passage is static.  Consider the detensed block of reality: all the various and sundry things existing hither and yon from this spot on the spatio-temporal manifold.  Each exists equally, whether it is Mary sitting, Mary standing, rainy weather, sunny weather, and so on.  Considered without succession, simultaneity, or times, this cast of characters would seem to be timeless.  It is bereft of any A-character.  And I just said we are to consider it without succession, simultaneity, and times.   Since there is no time here there also is no passage.

Passage supposedly gets added when succession is added.  But succession only adds to reality, it does not subtract.  For succession to add some transition to reality it needs to make it so that Mary is sitting and then not sitting.  It needs to make it so that it is rainy and then not rainy.  But tenseless succession does not do that.  Every last tenseless atom exists no less than it did before succession was added to our hypothetical reality.   Mary is no less sitting because she is related by succession to her standing self.

I will close on a less positive note. While I think passage is surely succession in this dynamic sense, it seems to me more work remains to understand the concept. Our dynamic conception of reality has seemed to some so obscure that they have thought the very notion was incoherent. Succession at least *seems* to be a relation and relations seem to require relata. A passing world at least may involve conflicting facts. Most dramatically it may involve P and then not P. But if I can only describe the passing reality by describing the conflicting facts, it seems that inevitably I will need to say something contradictory. I need to say that P and not-P. But it cannot be the case that P and not P. Yet the concept of passage is utterly basic and ubiquitous. It would be strange if it were incoherent. I am hopeful that we are only lacking the right conceptual tools to explain how reality can involve genuine transition.

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1. Much more recently, Kit Fine tells us that “for time to pass from one moment to the next is for the property of presentness to pass from one moment to the next” (2005: 286). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. But it is surely not the same. The mine run of change phenomena require that there be a common subject for change. My sitting and and then standing is within the mine run since I am the common subject of sitting and standing. But there is nothing remotely evident to provide the common subject when it is 2009 and then 2022. If one strains for something to call the common subject in that case as well, fine. Perhaps it is the universe, or reality. The point is just that the passage of time, and thus succession, must at least allow the possibility that the things in transition do not occur together. At least in many cases, if P and then Q, P stops and Q comes to be. When succession happens, often at least, it makes it so that what was happening is not happening any more. (The B-Theorist will agree. So one must add: is not happening, period.) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See Oaklander (2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)