What Is It Like to Be Past?

Abstract

The Growing Block Theory of time asserts that temporal reality encompasses all present and past things. The world grows as things come to be present. When something becomes past it does not cease to be, it simply moves away from the growing edge of reality. Thus past things are just like present ones, except not present. But if past things are just as real as present ones, and qualitatively just like them, how can I tell if what is happening is present and not past? It seems everything would look the same to me whether I was past or present. And so I don’t know that I am present. To avoid this intolerable result, I argue on behalf of the Growing Block Theorist that the present does not look the same as the past. Experiences exemplify the property of presentness when they are present, and I can be directly acquainted with that fact. My direct acquaintance enables me to be justified in believing my experiences are present and to know the same. I develop this view and conclude by responding to objections.

I. The Epistemic Objection to the Growing Block Theory of Time

How do I know I’m present? How do I know that what I am perceiving and experiencing is present and not, say, past? It’s a strange thought. In a way, my belief that I am present is more fundamental than my belief that I am perceiving real things, which is also susceptible to far-fetched doubt. Even in a skeptical scenario where I am dreaming or in a vat, I am still present. I can imagine I am dreaming, I think. But I’m not sure what I’m doing if I try to imagine I’m not present. Still, if I have to show how I know I’m present, how would I do it?

Doubt about my location in time is prompted by certain otherwise promising views about time. Some terminology: past, present, and future are the A-characteristics. Events change with respect to these characteristics as time passes. My next birthday is future to some extent, is moving ever closer to the present, will be present, and then will slip further and further into the past. My birthday is thus changing with respect to its A-characteristics. B-characteristics involve the relations of temporal priority. These relations are permanent. My next birthday is after my last by exactly one year; it always has been and always will be. An A-theory of time is one that takes A-characteristics to be important to the nature of time. A B-theory says B-characteristics are basic, and A-characteristics are either derivative or just illusory. The distinction between A- and B-characteristics is due to J. M. E. McTaggart (1927).

The theory of time that seems to call into question whether I know I am present is an A-theory. The theory says that there are not only present things but past things as well. This theory—the Growing Block Theory (GBT)—works like this. As time passes, things become present. Babies are born, galaxies are formed, lectures are presented, and so on. By becoming present, things and events come to be, period. Before becoming present, these things and events were nothing at all. On the Growing Block Theory the future is just nothing. These things that come to be are present for some time. After that, they cease to be present and become past. Past things are not, as you might imagine, things that have ceased to be, but they are things that have ceased to be present. Since present things don’t go away, and time keeps passing, reality gets bigger and bigger, as more and more things come into existence, thus, the name Growing Block. The present is the edge of that growing block.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Two features of GBT combine to call into question our knowledge that we are present. First, the view asserts that there are past things. Reality encompasses all past things. Past things are just as real as present ones. Second, with one caveat, GBT says that past things are just like present things. The caveat is that past things of course differ from present things in every way entailed by the fact that they are not present. Present things are on the edge of reality, for example; past things are not. Nothing is after a present thing; at least some things are after past things. But the caveat leaves a great deal of room for similarity between the present and the past. Past things have the same colors, shapes, and sizes as present things; they have the same causal impact, same spatial relations; and so on.

The argument then goes like this.[[2]](#footnote-2) My evidence that I am present would be the same whether I was present or not. However I figure out that I am present, there is nothing in how things seem that differs whether the things doing the seeming are present or past. Presentness is not a visible characteristic. Past people, like present ones, believe they are present. Imagine Julius Caesar out there being guided—misguided in his case—to think he is present by the same evidence that sustains my belief. Generally, even if it leads to true belief, evidence can’t produce knowledge if that evidence does nothing to distinguish a scenario where the belief is true from one in which the belief is false. Thus, it seems that if there are past things, and past things are just like present ones, then I can’t know that I am present rather than past.

That is rough. For example, it is not entirely clear from the previous paragraph whether the target of the argument is knowledge or reasonable belief altogether.[[3]](#footnote-3) We will need to pin down some details. My plan in this paper is as follows. First I will be more specific about what the epistemic objection is and is not. Once I have a specific formulation more clearly before us, I will propose a solution on behalf of Growing Block Theory. I will argue that the present does in fact look different than the past. I can know and typically do know that I am present because I am directly acquainted[[4]](#footnote-4) with the fact that present things are present. Past people’s epistemic situation is different because they are not acquainted with the presentness of anything. As I defend this response I address the question: what does the past look like?

Before proceeding to a more precise elaboration of the argument, I should forestall a concern. Newcomers to the debate may wonder whether I really can intelligibly doubt my own presentness. Participants in the debate do not take themselves to be skeptics generally. They say I can reasonably believe and know I exist. The problem for the Growing Block Theorist, they say, is with showing I know my existence is also present. But it is a fair question: how I could exist without being present. Speaking English, as we are, “exist” is present tensed and thus spoken normally “I exist” means “I exist in the present.” So, if the skeptic concedes I know I exist, he must also concede I know I exist in the present.

The seeds of the answer are contained in the statement of the Growing Block Theory. GBT asserts that there are not only present things but also past things. For example, it says there is such an entity as the Roman Empire. But how can that be? English is a tensed language, and the only plausible tense involved in saying that there is such thing as the Roman Empire is present tense. But the Roman Empire does not exist now.

W. V. Quine (1960) and others contend that in addition to tensed language there is a tenseless way of speaking. The “is” in “2 is even” is neither present tense, nor inclusive of all tenses. It is tenseless. It makes no commitment to the fact occurring in time at all. Adopting this framework, the GBTer can say that the Roman Empire exists, speaking tenselessly. To clarify that the Roman Empire is past, the GBTer can assert that the Roman Empire exists (tenselessly) before the present time. Now returning to our puzzle, it is intelligible to suppose I exist but not at present. The sense in which it is granted on all hands that I exist, and even know that I exist, is the sense in which I exist tenselessly. The goal is to show that I also know that I exist at present.

Let us turn to a more precise elaboration of the epistemic argument.[[5]](#footnote-5) Call a “slice” a set of all the simultaneous events and objects (or temporal parts thereof). We may assign each slice to the time contemporaneous with it. As time proceeds, a new slice comes to be, and all the previous slices continue to exist. A person that comes to be with slice S1 at T1 continues to exist at T2, T3, and so on. A “predicament” at a certain slice at a certain time is “how things are” to a person “subjectively speaking” at that slice at that time. Consider how things seem to me subjectively at this slice at this time. The collection of all of those seemings is my predicament at this slice at this time. Since slices seem to slip through time unchanged, so should my predicament. Even if my predicament does not survive unchanged as this slice slips from one time to the next, at least it seems plausible to suppose that I can’t tell just subjectively whether this predicament occupies a slice at a present time, or a slice that occupies a time at some distance from the present. So, as I examine my subjective state, I can’t tell whether my experiences are present or not. Since there is much more time that is past than present, it is much more likely that my experience is happening in the past than in the present. Therefore, I don’t know that I am present and in fact should rationally believe that I am past.

The notion of “subjective indistinguishability” assumed by the argument needs some unpacking. Predicaments A and B should be taken to be subjectively indistinguishable if it is impossible for someone to be justified in believing one predicament obtains but not the other. And if one cannot be justified in believing that one’s predicament is at one time rather than another, one cannot be justified in believing that one’s predicament is at the present time rather than a past one.

I will explore the view that I can be justified in believing that one of my predicaments—specifically, this one—is present. Indeed, this predicament is subjectively distinguishable from the others because I can be directly acquainted with the fact that my experience is present. On this response, it is my acquaintance with facts involving such presentness that grounds my knowledge that certain things are present and not past. Although usually waived off as a non-starter in the recent literature, the view has some precedent in previous discussions. As George Schlesinger puts it (1994), it is plausible to suppose that there is a certain portion of reality “of which I am immediately aware as existing in the present.” And H. Scott Hestevold (1994) toyed with holding that “one can be directly aware of an event’s having the nonrelational transitory temporal property *being present*.” (Hestevold ultimately rejected the view.) The view deserves reconsideration.

II. Acquaintance with the Present

In this Section, I explain how my response enables us to have knowledge that we are present within the framework of the Growing Block Theory. Whatever other shortcomings it may have, the view at least allows that a Growing Block Theorist can hold that one knows one is present. In the next Section, I consider and respond to some objections to the effect that the price one must pay is too high.

I assume that my knowledge that I am present derives from my knowledge about the character of certain experiences I have. Perhaps there is a self that is distinct from, and subject of, my various experiences. If so, I might also have knowledge of that subject, even without experiences as intermediaries. That is a tricky issue I would prefer to avoid. I believe the argument would go similarly whether directed at knowledge of a self or knowledge of experiences. Nonetheless, an independent self seems rather spooky to me, while experiences are admitted on all sides; so, I will focus my attention on experiences.

In general, my being (non-inferentially) justified in believing an experience has a certain property involves (a) believing the experience has that property; and (b) being acquainted with the fact that makes my belief true.[[6]](#footnote-6) Suppose that I am having a pain. I believe this experience is present. And, I say, I am directly acquainted with the fact that my pain has the property of being present. So my belief that my experience is present is justified because it is directly tied to the fact in the world that makes the belief true. The tie is simply my direct acquaintance with the fact that my experience is present.

I think this conception allows me not only to justifiably believe I am having present experiences but also to know that I am having present experiences. I will assume for our purposes that knowledge is justified true belief plus the absence of any undefeated defeaters.[[7]](#footnote-7) An undefeated defeater is a true proposition, which if added to one’s justification would defeat it—where there is no other true proposition, which if added would restore one’s justification. If I believe I see a computer screen in front of me on the basis of my visual experience, the true proposition that 90% of all people have been hallucinating a lot recently would likely defeat my justification. Yet, the further true proposition that I have never hallucinated would presumably restore my justification. Thus, the true proposition that 90% of all people have been hallucinating a lot recently is a defeated defeater for my justified belief that I am seeing a computer screen.

Belief that my experiences are present may be justified and constitute knowledge specifically within the context of Growing Block Theory. The relevant challenge to my purported knowledge that my experiences are present is the true (conjunctive) proposition that constitutes Growing Block Theory. GBT says that there are not only present but also past things and that (generally) past things are just like present things.

The response is well-placed to show why GBT is not a defeater that undermines my justification for believing that my experiences are present. It is true, as Merricks and Braddon-Mitchell (2002) point out, that there are in fact far more past things than present things. But that does nothing to undermine my justification for believing that my experiences are present, where that justification is based on my being acquainted with the presentness of the experiences. The true proposition that the vast majority of people are not my wife does not defeat my justification for believing that someone is my wife, where that justification is based on my visual experience. My visual experience connects me with my wife in a way it does not with all the other people. Similarly, my acquaintance connects my belief with present things in a way it does not with any others.

The true proposition that past things look very much like present things also does not defeat my justification. Indeed, this is where my approach squarely disagrees with the received epistemic argument. While past things have the same colors, shapes, and so on as present things, they do differ in appearance from present things in a systematic way. Only present things are present and are “visibly” so.

It is no part of this view to suppose everything I think is present is something whose presentness I am in fact directly acquainted with. I believe there is a star shining far in the sky in the present. It may well seem that I “observe” the presentness of the shining star. But as D.H. Mellor argues (1981: 26), science teaches that I’m often wrong about the presentness of the things I observe. The star ceased to exist millions of years ago. So I better not hold that I am directly acquainted with the presentness of the shining of the star. Nor do I need to take a hard line about which things I am directly acquainted with. I do want to distinguish between perception and acquaintance. Perception involves the relation manifested in seeing, hearing, and so on. Typically, one will perceive physical objects or events that are not mental properties. While one could hold that one is acquainted with physical objects, all I need for my view is that I am acquainted with mental states. After all, it is much harder to imagine being mistaken about the presentness of experiences than the presentness of perceptual objects.

To summarize, I am justified in believing my experiences are present because I am directly acquainted with their presentness. Their presentness is one of their properties that is manifest to me. I know my experiences are present because I am justified in believing the same and because there is no undefeated defeater that destroys my justification. My epistemic situation thus differs substantially from Caesar’s. Caesar also (tenselessly) has experiences. His experiences, unlike mine, lack the property of presentness. Caesar used to be directly acquainted with the facts involved in his experiences’ being present. Now he is not. Thus, Caesar’s experiences look different from mine. He is still directly acquainted with his experiences and various of their properties, but not with their presentness since they are not present. It is essential to GBT that objects change as they cease to be present and become past. On this version of GBT, one consequence of this change is that when something becomes past it ceases to be a relatum of the direct acquaintance relation that grounds the justification for believing one is present.

III. Objections and Responses

I have proposed that present experiences have a property of presentness and that we frequently are directly acquainted with facts involving those experiences’ being present. That direct acquaintance, I have argued, grounds my justified belief that I am (or my experiences are) present. And, where my belief is true—as it must be when I am directly acquainted with the fact that makes the belief true—I also know that my experiences are present. Thus, hopefully, I have shown that this view answers the epistemic objection to the Growing Block Theory. But at what cost? It may be that accepting these various suppositions would imply one is justified in believing and can know that one’s experiences are present. But perhaps one or more of my premises is wildly implausible, or the argument not only saves GBT but also has one or more terribly unwelcome consequence. In this Section, I consider objections in both categories.

Objection 1: Many people evidently don’t find themselves acquainted with any facts involving the property of presentness. In fact, it’s hard to imagine what being acquainted with that property could even *be like*. One can imagine being acquainted with colors or shapes or colored and shaped sense data, but there is just no presentness there in experiences to be acquainted with. Even if direct acquaintance with presentness would solve the Growing Block Theorist’s epistemic problems, this particular structure is built on a foundation of sand.

Response: If I say I’m aware of something and you say you are not, that may simply be the end of the discussion. I find myself directly acquainted with the presentness of experiences. My interlocutor apparently does not. Appearances can be deceiving, as can the lack of appearance. I can tell my interlocutor to look harder. And my interlocutor can tell me that what I think I’m acquainted with is something other than what I think it is. But, there is little prospect of progress on this front.

The objection may be seen as taking issue with the idea that facts involving presentness are the sort of thing that one *could be* directly acquainted with. One might argue that one can be acquainted with concrete particulars such as experiences, or even with properties, such as the intensity of a certain pain, but being acquainted with such an abstract property as presentness may seem especially problematic.

But absent some further development, this objection should not persuade us. The objector has not pointed to any reason to suppose that acquaintance with facts involving presentness is any more metaphysically problematic than acquaintance with anything else. The ultimate test of whether one is acquainted with something is simply whether the entity is there to be found. And I do find facts involving the presentness of experience.

Objection 2: Caesar thinks he is acquainted with present experiences but according to this response he is mistaken. Why couldn’t I similarly think I am acquainted with present experiences but be mistaken? And if I can be mistaken, how can I know my experiences are present if it’s possible that they’re not?

Response: This objection echoes Braddon-Mitchell’s (2002: 201) concern that we want a “guarantee” that our belief that what is going on is present. But my belief that my experiences are present can be guaranteed in at least one of two ways. One of these has relevance to its epistemic status and the other does not.

A belief can be guaranteed to be true because it is trivially true. How should one understand the truth conditions of “I am present”? On the token-reflexive account of the truth conditions of tensed assertions, the statement that “I am present” is trivially true. A present-tensed token of an assertion is true as long as the event described is simultaneous with the token. A token about itself is always simultaneous with what it is about, since it is always simultaneous with itself. So a present tensed token of “I am present” is trivially true because it says that it is occurring simultaneously with its occurrence.

But that triviality has nothing to do with a notion of guarantee that is connected with knowledge. I can unreasonably assert all sorts of things that are trivially true. Suppose I am committed to believing all my local Chinese restaurant’s fortune cookies, which happens to only print logical truths. I do not reasonably believe what I say when I repeat the logical truths on the fortune cookies. The notion of guarantee that matters to knowledge is one that indicates that the epistemic support for a belief entails that the belief is true.[[8]](#footnote-8) In this sense, my belief that my experience is present is guaranteed to be true. The epistemic support for the belief is my direct acquaintance with the fact that makes the belief true. I cannot have that direct acquaintance without my belief being true.

Objection 3: The view seems to conflict with the phenomenological data. Aren’t the phenomenological data in Caesar’s experience precisely the same as the phenomenological data in my experience? How could they not be the same? How does a past painful experience feel different from a present painful experience? So, arriving at the question of the title of the paper, how does a past pain look different from a present pain?

Response: The short answer is I don’t know. I don’t think this is an embarrassment for my view, though. All the pains I have ever been acquainted with have been (initially) present. All the experiences I have ever been acquainted with have been (initially) present. All the experiences anyone has ever been acquainted with have been (initially) present. The way one can tell and describe the character of a property is by discerning it from things that don’t have that property. One can helpfully describe the reddish appearance red things have because lots of things are observed to have other colors and in fact there are many things including red things that are observed to have non-color properties. But no one has ever described a non-present thing, so I need not be embarrassed to admit that I could not describe the discernible difference between present things and past things.

The situation is as follows. When Caesar’s experiences were present he was directly acquainted with their being present. If he had occasion to describe his experiences he would have described them in ways that assumed their presentness. Those experiences are no longer present. He is “still” acquainted with them. But he cannot describe them any longer because his days of describing are over. And so it is with everyone else who has had and been acquainted with experiences. Any descriptions of those experiences must have occurred in the present when the experiences were present. Thus, it is unsurprising that we have no way to compare experiences that are present with any others.

In conclusion, one can plausibly believe that there are many past things in addition to present ones and that those past things are in many ways very similar to present things. And one can combine those assertions with the commonsense view that we know and justifiably believe that we are present.

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1. The classic exposition of the view is C. D. Broad (1923). Other proponents include Tooley (1997) and McCall (1994). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For slight variations on this theme see Cameron (2017), Sider (2011), and Merricks (2006). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. In the following I focus on justified below, although I do not dwell on the potential differences between justification, rationality, and warrant. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. I use “awarencess” and “acquaintance” interchangeably below. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See Miller (2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See Fumerton (1995: 73). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See Moser (1989). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Steup (2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)