

The Elusive Appearance of Time

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1. Introduction

A question that now and again pops up in the philosophy of time is whether the appearance of time provides support for any metaphysical theory about what time is really like. Well, it is generally assumed that if the appearance of time provides such support, it supports the A-view of time. The underlying assumption is of course that time appears to be like the A-view presents it as being, notably *tensed*, i.e. divided into a future, present and past, and *transitory*, i.e. involving some kind of 'flow' or 'passage' of times or events from the future into the present and away into the distant past.

In this paper I will attempt to explain why philosophers have thought that the appearance of time is tensed and transitory, offer some reasons to doubt that time appears to us in that way, and suggest an alternative view of the appearance of time. This will require us to understand 'appear' in a more narrow sense than previous thinkers have taken for granted, but I will argue that this narrow sense is appropriate for the question we are concerned with; does the appearance of time support some theories about the real nature of time and not others?

2. Methodological Considerations

It is difficult to reach decisive conclusions about what time appears to be like. To begin with, the validity of any given conclusion or description in matters concerning phenomenological analysis will depend on agreement from our peers, not on arguments professing to prove that our experience must be such and such. Such agreement is readily forthcoming for the simplest features of our experience, those that hardly require any reflective effort, such as the observation that colours always appear in experience as also having spatial extension. We don't argue that this is so. We ask each other to consider whether this is how it appears to be in experience, and we agree when we have consulted our experience; we do not consult arguments.

However, an analysis of the appearance of time is a much more difficult task because time does not appear to us as a simple and distinct item in our experience, not like experiences of apples and pears, colour and extension, the smell of coffee, and stabs of pain. We can clearly

identify in our own experience the particular experience of pain and discern it from an experience of redness, as well as to reflect upon the phenomenal characteristics of pain and redness (although it may be impossible to describe them adequately to someone unable to have the experience). But, we only seem able to identify our experience of time and discern it, say, from our experience of pain and colours by abstracting from experience as a whole just those features that bear on the temporality of experience, such as duration, succession, tense, passage, etc. Every experience, and every item in that experience, is in time but there is no experience of time itself distinct from any experience. There is no distinct experience of duration that is not the duration of something that is not itself duration, or an experience of succession that is not the succession of something, *etcetera*. Nor is there an experience of anything that does not have a duration and has a position in some kind of succession; temporality belongs to everything, but everything is not temporality. This means (i) that the way time appears can only be assessed by an advanced phenomenological analysis, and (ii) that the resulting conception of time's appearance will necessarily be an *abstraction* from the experience in which we identify the temporal features. This again invites the risk that our preconceived ideas about time—our theories really—will influence how we think of time as appearing. This is obviously something that applies to my own musings on the subject too.

3. The Appearance of Time: Passage vs. Persistence

I suspect that when people are asked to describe their experience of time then they may well come to think of something like the following offered by L. A. Paul:

I step out of my house into the morning air and feel the cool breeze on my face. I feel the freshness of the cool breeze now, and, as the breeze dies down, I notice that time is passing—I need to start walking or I will be late for class. We all know what it is like to have these sorts of experiences (Paul 2010).

This, I suggest, is a typical narrative of temporal experience, given by someone who is focused on giving an account of the way things unfold. And as you read it your attention is in all probability drawn to the expressions 'step out of my house', 'feel the breeze on my face', 'breeze dies down', 'noticing that time is passing', 'start walking', 'will be late for class'. They present us with a series of events or actions or episodes,

each taking up a certain time, and which can easily be imagined or represented as being in some sense adjacent to each other and as following one after the other. Indeed, we can think of time as a series of such episodes moving from the future into the present and on towards the distant past.

But is this succession of episodes really the most salient feature of our immediate experience of the spatiotemporal world? I think not. Notice instead ‘I’, ‘my house’, and then all the things that are left out of the account, the pillow against her cheek as she wakes up, the alarm clock on the table, the bed, the slippers, the toothbrush, the door, the pavement, the cars on the kerbside, really all the objects that make up the world around us and without which there is no stepping outside, no cool morning breeze, or walking on pavement. Unlike the ‘stepping out’ of the house and the ‘dying down’ of the breeze, then the things that feature in these transitory episodes of our lives remain in our awareness of the world throughout the ritual of waking up, preparing for work, and going out. They appear to be the substance of these episodes. They even remain there day after day after day, and we may be aware of their existence even when they are not present as objects of our experiences. If the neighbours’ car isn’t in its usual place, we imagine it to be somewhere else but not some-when else.

To my mind, the most salient aspect of our everyday experience of the world is not that it is a world of fleeting states or episodes passing us by, but a world of objects that we perceive as persisting throughout the episodes we call events; the events appear to be temporary phases of the objects and their constellations. I am not here arguing that this is how it really is, just that it appears to be that way.

Furthermore, it seems to me that we are left with a choice between the idea of time consisting of a succession of events in transit, and the idea of time as consisting of a succession of temporary states of persistent objects. I find it very difficult to reconcile the idea that reality is *fundamentally* made up of events in transit, with the idea that it is *fundamentally* made up of things undergoing continuous change. For me, one important criteria for a successful theory of time—or, really, of the nature of spatiotemporal reality—is whether it successfully resolves this conflict. Here I don’t offer a resolution, merely a statement of the problem to be resolved in the attempt to determine what time is really like.

A first observation to support the idea that time does not appear to us as a series of events passing from future to past through the present is what I take to be a datum of experience, notably that we never directly experience future or past events, nor do we ever directly perceive a passing of events into the present from the future, or their departure out of the present. This datum of experience was recognised already by St. Augustine (*Confessions*, Book 11, Ch. XVI–XX) and has been repeated at regular intervals throughout history, e.g. by Reid (1855: 211) and Dainton (2008: 362), just to name a few.

Indeed, if we consult our experience then it appears instead that the events in question come into existence through a change in the persistent objects that already exist. A conference does not appear to come into being by popping into the present from the future, but instead appears to come into being when a group of already existing people gather at the same place to discuss some issue or another. These people, and the venue of their meeting, do not appear to come from the future, but instead from other places to coincide at the venue. Whatever these people say and do during the conference appears to come into being as they do them; a gesture does not appear from the future but comes into being as someone moves her hand. We may perhaps interpret what we experience as being compatible with the theory that somehow the successive stages of the conference (i.e., whatever the participants say and do) move from future to present, but this is not how things appear to us; this is theory–dependent interpretation.

Indeed, it is clear that those philosophers who find tense and tensed passage to be a feature of the appearance of time in ‘experience’, do not confine their understanding of ‘experience’ to what we immediately perceive. They also include in ‘experience’ the content of their minds generally, including perceptions, anticipations, memories, imaginings, and just thinking generally. This is very obviously the case in Russell’s account of temporal experience (1915), where he says that “...the experience of succession will be very different according as the objects concerned are both remembered, one remembered and one given in sense, or both given in sense” (1915: 212–13). According to Russell, we can perceive succession between objects (read ‘events’) that both are present ‘in sense’, but then both events appear to be present; the first still audibly ringing in our ears as we hear the next. For the succession to appear as a succession between a present and past object, one must appear ‘in sense’ and the other ‘in memory’, i.e., the latter no longer

appears as an object of immediate sensory perception. In that case both objects are parts of a *representation* containing an object of sense and an object of memory. That representation is present to us (now) even though one of its components is a memory of an object that appears to be absent.

We can remember past events, and can predict what kind of event is about to happen. But remembering an event, or predicting a kind event, is not to experience the event that is the object of the memory or prediction in question. Consequently, we do not experience the object pass from being absent to be present and to become absent again, as it passes from future to present, and from present to past. To my mind, to think of all the objects of every mental event that occurs in our mind as something we ‘experience’—including then the objects of memories, predictions, fantasies, *etc.*—is to eradicate the distinction between experience and theory; really, between how things naturally appear to us in perception and how we represent them as being in thought. It would make little sense to ask whether experience supports one theory over another if we did not make a distinction between experiencing something and thinking about it or representing it being a certain way.

Admittedly, it is difficult to distinguish between experience and thought, just as it is difficult to distinguish between what is immanent in perception and what we project into experience on the basis of what we already know or take for granted. The manner in which the world appears to us in sensory perception is widely believed to be theory-laden, or, in other words, a product of a combination of bottom-up and top-down cognitive processes, many of which are subconscious. The general idea is that experience is built on the basis of some sensory input, but a lot of the structure we then perceive is apparently the result of how our faculty of representation organises this input. That structure, and meaning, which is imposed on the input is accordingly due to the top-down process, and is very much dependent on our background beliefs. For instance, when we experience each other, we immediately perceive the other as a thinker; as a bearer of mental content. But we do not really experience any thinking or thoughts, except our own. We really project into our experience of each other the presence of thoughts and the ability of thought on the basis of our beliefs that beings similar to us surely also are conscious beings like ourselves.

It is difficult to disentangle what is a result of the bottom-up and top-down process, but it is possible. In fact spatial perception is particularly

suited to do this. I will attempt to illustrate the distinction between what could be called ‘pure input perception’ and ‘perceptual experience modulated by top–down processes’, by appealing to the readers experience of seeing the image below.



Figure 1. Photo by R. C. James, in Gregory (1970: 14). The image is considered to belong to the public domain.

People seeing this for the first time see only black blotches on a white surface. Eventually, most people ‘discover’ that it is a picture of a Dalmatian dog sniffing the ground at an intersection of two paths. The dog’s head is in the centre of the picture. One can imagine a small hill in the background, with a tree, and leaves scattered on the ground.

Even for those familiar with the picture but haven’t seen it for a while, the initial impression is an image merely of black blotches on a white surface that do not even hint at any kind of depth or structure. Then the dog suddenly ‘materialises’ and from that moment you are no longer looking at a black and white two–dimensional surface, but an image that at least hints at a spatial depth that wasn’t there to begin with. If you now focus on the dog, you have a clear sense of bulk in the dogs body, a foreground and background. It is as if you are looking at a scene through a window. There are other ways to show how our representational faculties can present us with a clear sensation of spatiality where there really isn’t a space. The mind can be cheated into producing extremely

real 3–dimensional representations, as if it could warp space itself. For instance in Random–Dot Stereograms such as this:

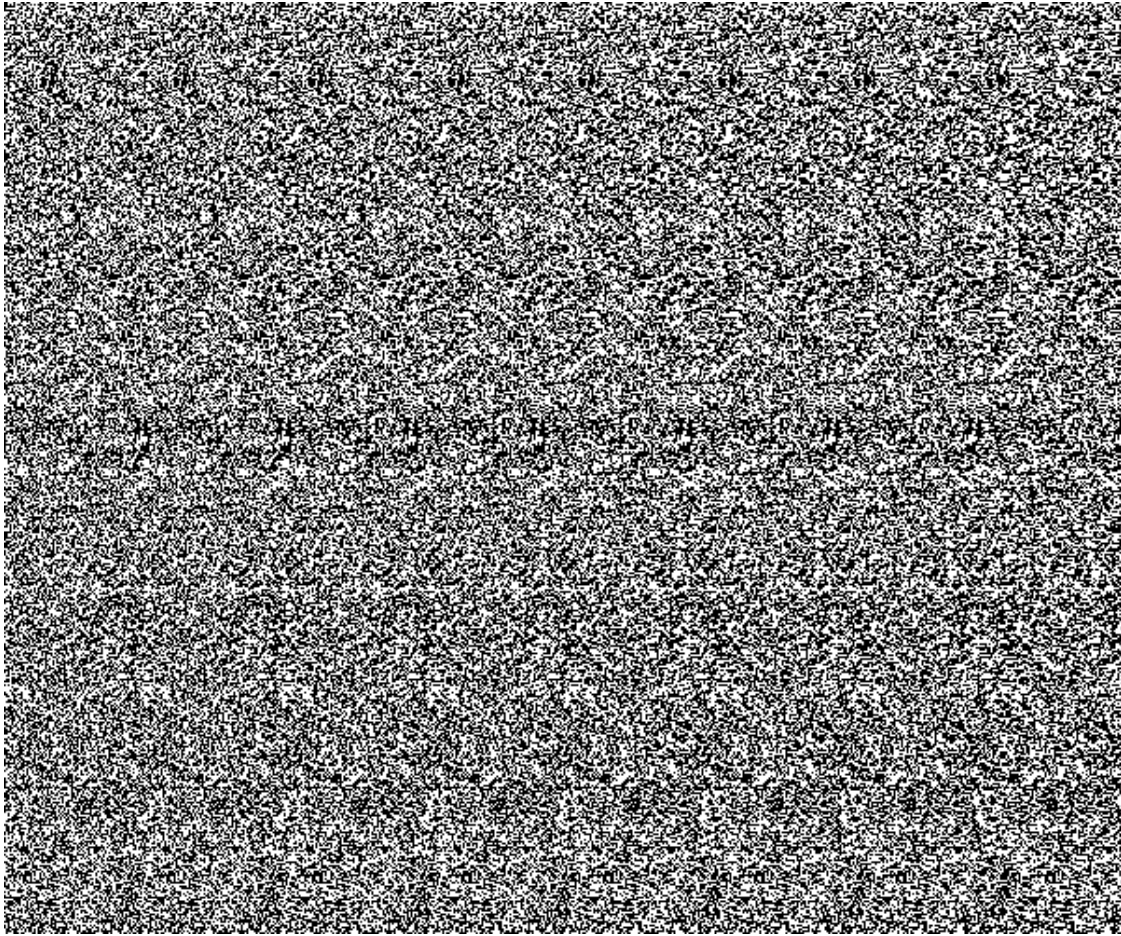


Figure 2: *Random–Dot Stereogram*, by David Chess (<http://www.davidchess.com/toys/rds2.gif>), who generously allows reproduction.

Put your face close to the image, cross your eyes, then slowly un–cross them as you slowly move away (experiment with distance, degree of cross–eyedness, and how fast you move away). If you get it right the image of a flat square on top of an egg–carton landscape will appear. Sometimes the flat square appears instead as an opening in the landscape under which you see a flat surface.

Returning to the experience of the Dalmatian, then while we perceive the image, and everything in our visual field, we are at all times aware of ourselves being located in a space that stretches out without boundaries in all directions. We are aware of space continuing even beyond the limits of the walls around us, above and below, but we do not perceive this through the senses. I am tempted to think that we ‘carry’ around with us at all times a representation of ourselves located in an unlimited

space of which we only experience a limited part. The space beyond that limited part of space that appears to us doesn't go away even when we close our eyes.

When we are looking at the picture of the Dalmatian, there is, I suggest, a distinction to be made between (i) 'pure input perception' (black blotches on a white surface), (ii) a 'perceptual experience modulated by top down processes' (Dalmatian in a park), but there is also (iii) a 'pure representation' (the spatial reality beyond that small region that we are sensorily aware of). I do suspect that the content of 'pure input perception' is very close to what Husserl would have called the *immanent* content of experience, the content of 'pure representation' close to what *transcends* the immanent, and the modulated experience is simply ordinary experience from which we can abstract the immanent and transcendent.

The question now is whether we can make the same distinctions for temporality, and it is at this point I find that things become a lot more difficult regarding time than space. First of all, I cannot clearly discern a pure input perception of time distinct from the pure input perception of the world we have already talked about in relation to spatiality. If there is a pure input perception of time then it is the same as the pure input perception of black blotches on a white surface (or some or other experience of that kind). But, I think I discern a modulated perceptual experience of temporality, which is not identical in kind to the 3D sensation we get when we identify the Dalmatian. I believe it is the modes of this modulated experience that Husserl was talking about when he described temporal experience as involving 'retention' and 'protention' (Husserl 1991, sect. 40).

Retention and protention are cognitive functions postulated by Husserl to explain the phenomenological datum that almost everything we perceive is perceived as a continuation of something that preceded it, and as something about to continue into something else. Basically, retention connects the present to what we experienced before, and protention connects the present experience with what we anticipate to come.

Retention and protention explain why we are not surprised by every new stage in the flow of consciousness, but only by sudden and unexpected changes and turns; stages that seem to have no connection to anything that went before. For instance, we are surprised by sudden disappearances of persistent objects, or of sudden appearances of

persistent objects, at least when we can't immediately find an explanation as to where they could have gone to, or come from. It strikes us as 'magical' when such things appear to happen, because they are apparent violation of the continuity usually in place when retention and protention work properly.

So, our experience of the present is modulated in the sense that it appears as a natural continuation of something, and as something that itself will continue into something yet to come. However, this is not equivalent to an experience of passing or flow of the anticipated into the present and away towards the distant past. Protention and retention are never features of anticipated or remembered experiences, but only of whatever we currently experience. Anyhow, protention and retention seem plausible candidates for being the temporal equivalent to the spatial modulation of pure input perception.

Now, let us move on to the question of whether there is a pure representation of time. I do not clearly discern an awareness of time extending into the future and past beyond the present, not in the clear and lucid fashion I discern an awareness of space extending in all directions beyond the limited part of space that I perceive.

One reason why my awareness of space is so much clearer and more lucid than my awareness of time may be because the spaces that I have to imagine beyond the space I do in fact perceive, can be imagined to be exactly like the spaces I actually perceive. We can perceive empty spaces (say, between you and the page you are reading) and so can use that perception as a model for our pure representations of the space we do not perceive. Remember that even though we know that the empty space is in fact filled with air, this is not something we perceive visually. In Humean terms, we have an impression of empty space that gives rise to a corresponding idea of empty space, an idea that we can use as we like in creating representations of spaces we have never had any impressions of. I can also imagine the space beyond the space I perceive to be filled with stuff in exactly the way the space I perceive is filled with stuff, so long as I imagine it to be filled with some other stuff of the same kind. It would lead to contradiction to think of the rest of space being filled with the same stuff as occupies the space I do perceive, since the same stuff can't be in two places at the same time.

We do perceive empty spaces and filled spaces, but we never perceive empty times; we only perceive times filled with something, if only with our thoughts. If there is an idea of empty time, this is an idea we arrive

at through abstraction. So we can't base our representation of the extended empty time on a *perception* of an empty present time, but perhaps on an *abstraction* from the perception of a filled time.

Furthermore, the act of imagining a past or future time as filled with stuff, is likely to conflict with my ideas about the nature of this stuff. We don't have the same problem in the spatial case. The stuff that fills the spaces I do not perceive, can easily be thought of as some altogether different stuff than the stuff filling the space I see in front of me. But to imagine the past, or at least the near past, as filled with stuff, will unavoidably involve me thinking of the past as being filled with the same things as I am perceiving right in front of me. As I am writing on the computer in front of me I can also remember having written on it yesterday and I can anticipate writing on it tomorrow. I cannot well think of the past as being as a matter of fact filled with exactly the same things as I have before me; they can't be equally 'then and there' and 'here now', can they? And yet the past (according to some versions of the A-view) and times earlier than now (according to the B-view) is believed to be filled with the *states* of the very stuff we see before us, and not of some altogether different stuff. So, the representation of the future and past as filled with whatever you and I will do, or have done, to all the things around us, requires us to think of the future and past as filled with the same stuff that is here now, if we think of these futures and pasts as existing and real entities. Thinking of the computer as 'really' there and then as well as 'here now', gives rise to the contradiction that it occupies many and—we popularly believe—mutually incompatible positions in time.

Having pointed out that the idea that time appears as a passage of states and/or events involving the things that make up the physical reality around us, conflicts with our ideas about the nature of that physical reality, then let me put the contradiction of multiple temporal locations aside. It would unavoidably lead to discussions about McTaggart's Paradox, David Lewis' *problem of temporary intrinsics*, and other issues too lengthy to deal with here (but see Ingthorsson 1998 and 2001). Let me just point out that with respect to time the resolution of the contradiction between passage of time and the persistence of stuff, seems to require us to significantly alter our natural conceptions of the nature of this stuff. Indeed, I think of the perdurance view of how stuff persists over time as an example of the kind of strange ontologies one could invent in an attempt to resolve the contradiction.

Let us also forget, for the moment, the problems of identifying clearly in our mind a pure representation of time. Let us instead assume that there nevertheless is such a pure representation of time extending beyond what I perceive and consider the consequences. If such a representation exists, shouldn't the structure of this representation be clear to us, or at least the relationships between the entities located in this structure? Shouldn't the location in time of the events that occupy it be clear to us, just as we can easily represent things having a location in our pure representation of space? It isn't clear to me that this structure is clear to us, or the location of events in the future and past. I do not represent past events as standing in transitive and asymmetric relations to the present and/or constantly receding away from me. Nor do I represent future events lined up in succession heading towards me.

The past appears to me instead as a jumbled selection of memories of objects and events/sequences, which all appear to me with approximately the same clarity, or at least in a way that has little or nothing to do with their temporal proximity to the present. The clarity with which I remember different things seem not to do with being further away or closer in time, but whether they were important, exciting or somehow triggered emotional responses in me at the time. When I try to think of their temporal order it is more a matter of simply knowing which of them happened first, or a matter of working out their order on the basis of various clues. For instance, whether I can remember what year something happened, how old some person was at the time (if they had grey hair or a beard), or by some clue about the place in which it happened or at what stage in my career. It is often a long and arduous mental exercise to figure out the temporal order of things, an exercise that in no way at all involves an attempt to temporally locate the event by determining their position in a representation of a temporal dimension. It only has to do with conceptual connections between the contents of the various memories.

Now, I realise such appeal to how things appear to me are inconclusive and I don't expect you to accept it straightforwardly. I just hope to have sowed enough doubt about the received view to prompt you to have a go at scrutinizing the way time appears to you and to submit your description of it to the philosophical discussion about the appearance of time. With time there might emerge some patterns of agreement.

4. Concluding remarks

I have presented my view of things as being in opposition with the received view. However, I do think there is notable agreement to be found in the literature, but perhaps not in the places you might expect. The agreement is to some extent implicit. For one thing, I think the popularity of the idea that substances are more basic than attributes and relations is to a great extent based on the fact that reality appears to us as a world of persistent entities bearing properties and holding relations. If the passage of events was indeed the most salient feature of the appearance of temporal reality, then process philosophy would be much more popular than it is today.

It bears to note, that the way I have described the appearance of temporal reality struck Kant to be so obvious that he thought we could derive from it—in an *a priori* fashion—the *Principle of the Permanence of Substance*, whose content Kant elucidates in the following way: “All appearances contain the permanent (substance) as the object itself, and the transitory as its mere determination, that is, as a way in which the object exists” (1787: A 182). Indeed, E. J. Lowe argues in a manner that has affinities to what Kant had in mind—albeit not with appeal to the appearance of time—that persistence gives time its unity (1998: 121ff). Finally, one can argue that Aristotle predated all of the above when he said: “Now everything that comes to be comes to be by the agency of something and from something and comes to be something” (*Metaphysics*, Book 7, part 7). By ‘everything that comes to be’ I understand him to mean all changes.

I have here offered some reasons to doubt that time appears to be tensed and transitory (although I do not doubt we represent events in this way). I have argued that temporal reality instead appears in the form of a substratum of some kind going through continuous changes. This appearance of time neither supports the A–view generally or the B–view of time, but it could perhaps support what is called presentism, the view that only the present exists. I will not at this time argue that it does, but the investigation of that possibility will be a prominent part of my future research.

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