

## AGENCY AND THE A-SERIES

**Roman Altshuler**  
**SUNY Stony Brook**

Following McTaggart's distinction of two series – the A-series and the B-series – according to which we understand time, much of the debate in the philosophy of time has been about our beliefs with regard to time, their tenses, and the relation between these beliefs and reality. While McTaggart hoped to show that neither series was applicable to reality – that, in fact, only an atemporal C-series was conceptually coherent – most philosophers have attempted to bypass this conclusion and instead defend either the A-series or the B-series as providing the true account of reality. Arguments grounded in our experience – traditionally the stronghold of the A-theorists – have by and large been about the beliefs involved in, or descriptive of that experience. The arguments have, however, been flawed in their attempt to draw on our experience for evidence of A-properties, and B-theorists have been quick to note these flaws. After examining some problems with the standard experience-grounded arguments for the existence of A-properties, I will argue that there is a type of entity in the world that – because its ontology involves irreducibly tensed experience – cannot exist within a tenseless reality. This entity is the rational agent. If the real world is to include agents, it will have the past, present, and future as well.

### I. The Role of Experience in A-theories and B-theories

The A-series orders events into past, present, and future. The B-series orders those same events relative to each other as earlier and later. In distinguishing these two views of time, McTaggart (1908) set out both the problem that would follow the philosophy of time for the next century – that of determining how the two series might be related to reality and which of them provides a correct description – and much of the framework within which the debates would be waged. Even then, McTaggart had already noticed a strong bias in favor of the B-series. B-properties, it seems, are the properties required by science, and thus seem to better fit with the notion of a mind-independent reality. The A-series seems more closely connected to the ways we experience time, and as such might be taken to be mind-dependent.

A certain naturalist program, seeking to limit ontology to entities open to study by the empirical sciences, has consequently encouraged attempts to explain away the apparent indispensability of the A-series. Much as a scientific image might be thought capable of replacing the manifest image, B-theorists have often held that beliefs involving A-properties are ultimately

reducible to the terms of a tenseless temporal series. McTaggart, of course, wanted to show that both temporal ways of representing reality are mistaken: he argued that the A-series is indispensable to time because it alone can account for change, but the A-series cannot coherently be applied to reality. Consequently, an atemporal C-series is our only option. But his account of change, among other things, turned out to be highly problematic, often allowing the B-theorist to marshal the full force of McTaggart's argument against the A-theorist without being forced to deny the reality of time.

Experience has thus been the A-theorist's traditional refuge. Even if reality is tenseless, we certainly seem to experience it as tensed. But if our experience is part of reality, then it seems to follow that at least something in reality is tensed. In arguing for the unreality of time, McTaggart of course anticipated a similar objection. In response, he noted that we do indeed experience events as past, present, and future. We remember, perceive, or anticipate various occurrences. But this does not prove that the events themselves change their qualities – memory, perception, and anticipation are different mental states with different qualities, but this fact does not show that the objects of these states also differ in quality. The B-theorist can lift this argument from McTaggart against the A-theorist. Let us take up this last point.

## II. Accounting for Temporal Experience

Attempts to eliminate A-properties seem to come into conflict with some readily apparent features of our experience. As just mentioned, we tend to remember some events and anticipate others. To remember event X is to now represent X to myself and, furthermore, represent it as past. This implies that at some point I experienced the event as present and, before that, perhaps anticipated its occurrence as future. Our experience, and our beliefs about that experience, appear to be tensed. Doesn't this suggest that reality is ordered according to an A-series? There are a number of ways of making this argument.<sup>1</sup> Prior (1959) famously pointed out that when I exclaim "thank goodness that's over!" I am expressing relief about a tensed fact which would not make sense on a tenseless B-theory: my relief is not that some event is earlier than the time of my utterance, but that the event is past. Smith (1988) echoes this by noting that a number of emotions, e.g., nostalgia or eagerness, are caused by beliefs that some events are past or future rather than simply earlier or later.<sup>2</sup>

But arguments of this sort – arguments that appeal to our beliefs about our experience of time – face powerful counter arguments. Our tensed beliefs and experiences might be products of an underlying tenseless reality. An error theory for tensed beliefs and experiences might explain the problem

## *Agency and the A-Series*

away. Barbour (1999), for example, reminds us that our memories, anticipations, etc., are the products of neural states, those being reducible to the positions of fundamental particles. The state of the world frozen at any instant will include my various mental states. Barbour thus defends a time-capsule theory: reality is composed entirely of static Nows, or frozen instants. That I have memories or feel time passing is no guarantee that those memories are of something past or that time really is passing.<sup>3</sup>

There are less drastic ways of defending tenselessness, and ones that don't deny the reality of time. When we look at what our experiential beliefs entail, we might find that the most reasonable way of accounting for their truth is a tenseless one. The advantage of this approach is that it allows for the reality of our experience, but denies that the experienced reality is tensed. Take the case of episodic memory, i.e., a memory of some past experience. This means that the truth-maker of the memory belief should contain the truth-maker of the original experience belief, since the former should entail the latter. On the B-theory, this is unproblematic: the truth-maker for the belief that I am having an experience now is that I have this experience at time  $t_0$ ; the truth maker for the memory at  $t_1$  is the same, together with the proposition that  $t_1$  is later than  $t_0$ . According to the A-theory, on the other hand, the first truth-maker states that the experience is occurring now, while the second states that the experience occurred in the past. But there is no entailment relation between these propositions, so the A-theory fails to explain a crucial feature of memory, namely, the entailment relation between my having had an experience and my remembering that experience (LePoidevin, 2006). But why, if tenseless facts account for our experiences and beliefs better than tensed ones, are our beliefs tensed?

The B-theorist, to put doubts to rest, must answer this final question. Mellor (1998; 2001), in particular, is keen to hold on to the B-theory but defend it from objections by giving the A-theorists everything – one might think – that they want: he avoids the error theory approach and, instead, takes one closer to illusionism. Tensed beliefs, he holds, are usually true, and irreducible. This last point – about irreducibility – is a bit of a farce. What Mellor means is that the beliefs themselves are about pasts, presents, and futures, and these cannot be reduced to anything else. But the facts that *make* our tensed beliefs true are, themselves, tenseless. I might, for example, believe that now I am tired, but I was not tired in the past – when I had my coffee – and will not be in the future, when I sleep. This may well be true, but what makes it true has nothing to do with A-properties. What makes it true is that a particular person, Roman Altshuler, is tired on June 29, 2008 at 11 p.m., was not tired at 5 p.m., and will be sleeping by 3 a.m. Finally, we

have different tensed beliefs at different times, and this gives rise to the experience of time flowing.<sup>4</sup>

### III. Agency and Time

But the A-theorist has another option. Let us look at why Mellor thinks we need true tensed beliefs. The reason lies in action theory. The now dominant view of rational actions is that they are caused by beliefs and desires (on most accounts, via an intention).<sup>5</sup> Because actions need to occur at particular times, the beliefs that cause them must be tensed beliefs; for the actions to succeed, they must also be true beliefs. For example, I must catch a train at 5 p.m. The belief that 5 p.m. is in the future is involved in my packing and taking a cab to the train station. To actually catch the train, I must at 5 p.m. have the belief that 5 p.m. is *now*. If the belief is false – if, when I think “now is 5 p.m.” it is actually 6 p.m. – then I have missed the train.<sup>6</sup> Mellor’s suggestion is that we have tensed beliefs, usually true ones, because evolution made it so: to survive, we must be capable of doing things on time, and to intentionally do anything on time, we must be capable of orienting ourselves in time by distinguishing past, present, and future.<sup>7</sup> But nothing in the world need correspond to these A-beliefs – the necessary facts are that the train leaves at 5 p.m., that I must leave my house by 4:15 p.m. to get there on time, and that by 4:58 p.m. I must be waiting on the platform. Seemingly, then, tensed beliefs can be perfectly true without implying that any fact corresponds to them.<sup>8</sup>

Let us go back to action theory. As already mentioned, on the standard view rational action is caused, by way of an intention, by some combination of beliefs and desires. To have a reason for action thus involves having some sort of desire. This is contentious, though I think the objections are answerable.<sup>9</sup> In any case, we need not press this issue, since Mellor already accepts the causal theory of action. But if desires and intentions (partially) cause actions, what features must these desires and intentions have in order to be causal? From a third-person perspective, we might say that desires and intentions are mental states, perhaps standing in token-token relationships with neural states, that cause (or are dispositionally constituted to cause) bodily movements. But events in my brain or occurring mental states that are not desires or intentions, that I am not and cannot even become aware of, may also cause bodily movements. In that case, my bodily movement would not be an action or, at any rate, not a rational or voluntary one. Furthermore, if my bodily movement is to be an action, the desires must cause it in the right way; not every causal path from an occurrent desire to a bodily movement will yield an action.<sup>10</sup> What distinguishes desires or intentions, particularly those that cause actions in the right way, from other neural or

## *Agency and the A-Series*

mental states or from desires and intentions that cause behaviors in deviant ways? What, in other words, accounts for desires' and intentions' causal power *as* desires and intentions, and so their causing of *actions* and not just bodily movements?

One feature that distinguishes desires and intentions from other states and, more importantly, that sets apart their unique causal mechanism, is that desires and intentions represent their object<sup>11</sup> to an agent as future.<sup>12</sup> A tenseless account will not work here. Of course we can say that the action, or the state of affairs it brings about, occurs later than the desire that causes it. But this is a third-personal view; it allows us to place desires into the causal succession of events leading up to the production of an action, but it fails to account for the feature that makes the desire causally active in the first place: first-personally, for the agent who acts on this desire, it is directed toward something future. Of course we might wish for something that is not future – for example, I might wish that it were now yesterday so that I could avoid that stupid thing I did after dinner. But that sort of desire is in principle incapable of causing an action.<sup>13</sup> Desires that can cause actions can only do so by virtue of being oriented toward the future.

Intentions aim at a future performance; if they are intentions-in-action (Searle, 2001), then they aim at a present performance. And I think analogous arguments may be made with regard to other features of agency – responsibility, for example, refers to the past – so that the entire framework of agential and moral experience is inseparable from a human reliance on A-properties. But we can leave these issues for a later time. The important point is this: while a desire or intention may occur earlier than the action it causes, and an intention-in-action may occur simultaneously with that action, desires and intentions cannot function as desires and intentions simply by representing something as later-than or simultaneous with the moment at which the agent experiences them. Though we can anticipate or hope for something that will occur later, and we might see something happen later than the moment at which another person decides to accomplish it, we cannot desire objects that are merely later occurrences for us. If the agent is not experiencing an object as future, then the state he is in is not a desire or intention. And if such a state causes a bodily movement, that movement will not be an action.

### IV. Intrinsic Temporal Vectors

I think this account survives the standard objections. For one, it excludes the possibility of a C-series or a B-series being sufficient to explain reality. Or, at least, we would have to drop from reality something besides A-properties. Desires and intentions could not be desires or intentions without the future

reference. A B-series or C-series alone cannot include desires and intentions within its ontology; consequently, it cannot include actions or agents. It can, of course, include mechanisms moving in response to causal inputs, such that the movement occurs later than the input. But again, this will no longer be a recognizable picture of agency. The causal account of agency differs from other kinds of causal accounts precisely because the causal elements involved have their causality only by virtue of their first-personal nature. And if we leave out the first-personal aspect of these elements, we can no longer give a satisfactory account of what is involved in this kind of causation.<sup>14</sup>

We should note that “future,” “present,” and “past” here do not refer to properties of relations to real objects, but only to properties of the relations themselves. It is certainly possible to desire something that never comes to be; it is even possible to have an intention-in-action while performing an action different from the one the agent takes herself to be performing. Nor do they refer to beliefs – I need not *believe* that the object of my desire is in the future in order to desire or intend it; I need only to have a representation of the object *as* future.<sup>15</sup> The B-theory works well enough when we assume that reality contains only third-personal entities and beliefs about those entities. As soon as we recognize that agency – or, more precisely, the kind of organized experience required for agency – is part of reality, however, we find reality thoroughly permeated by A-properties.

It is neither surprising nor accidental that LePoidevin focuses on episodic memory, which he takes to be reducible to propositional claims, while Mellor discusses only the belief component of agency, as if agents were situated within a temporal order entirely by their clocks. But we cannot provide B-properties on which the A-properties central to agency might depend. Since desires and intentions are not beliefs, their occurrence does not depend on tenseless truth-makers. What makes it true that the object of my desire is future is not that my desire refers to an object that will occur at a time later than the occurrence of the desire (a fact completely irrelevant to the issue), but simply the fact that I have a desire. Unlike beliefs, which require only a particular direction of fit with regard to their objects, desires and intentions contain an intrinsic temporal vector.<sup>16</sup>

This account allows A-properties to exist even in a C-series time capsule. Within a Now, my desire may not, in time, lead to my performing an action. But if there are actions, then there are desires, and if there are desires, then there are A-properties. Since the temporal vector (in the case of desires and intentions, “future” is the vector that relates the state to its object) is intrinsic to the mental state itself, it cannot be ontologically eliminated even by the elimination of time. If there are entities called agents, then they have mental

## Agency and the A-Series

states like desires and intentions. And these mental states cannot exist unless they refer to future objects.

The A-properties I have described are rather different from those traditionally defended by A-theorists, because they do not involve either any flow of time or change. They merely indicate directions according to which experience must be organized so as to allow for agency.<sup>17</sup> It is possible that the A-properties by which all our activity in the world is organized provide the foundation for an experience of the flow of time without themselves giving us succession. And this is precisely why the debate between A-theorists and B-theorists is wrong to focus the question on which of these two series is the true one. What is rarely mentioned is that both may be true (Smith, 1985). Together with the B-series, by which the events we experience are ordered, the directional A-properties allow us to influence the events within this order. It follows that both series can be adopted without redundancy: the A-series does not give us anything that the B-series has.<sup>18</sup> The B-series provides a temporal world for us to experience. A-properties make it a world we can act in.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Obviously, since such arguments assert the reality of the A-series, they are meant to challenge both B-theories and C-theories.

<sup>2</sup> Craig (2001) has similarly argued that a perfectly rational wish – the wish that it were now some other time – could not be rational unless there really were tensed facts, particularly, the fact that now is now.

<sup>3</sup> “If, as I have suggested, all our conscious experiences have their origin in real structure within the Nows, we can do without the fiction of the moving present. The sense we have that time has advanced to the present Now is simply our awareness of being in that Now.” (Barbour, 1999, p. 44) There are, of course, problems: if experience is entirely the causal product of the state of the world, it becomes unclear how any experience could tell us anything about the state of the world, and this opens a direct path to skepticism.

<sup>4</sup> “These, and all the other changes we are continually making in our A-series beliefs, are real changes, with real causes and real mental and physical effects. They are the changes that embody our experience of the flow of time. Even though time does not flow in reality, in our minds the time of our lives really does flow.” (Mellor, 2001) This is somewhat mysterious, but the point is clear. It is also strange: changing beliefs can give rise to an experience of change in beliefs, but how can they give rise to an experience of time flowing? I can experience a bell tolling continuously for a full minute without, at any point, forming the belief “the bell is striking now.” See Smith (1988) for a related point.

<sup>5</sup> This theory, of course, got its major contemporary start with Davidson (1963).

<sup>6</sup> “This is what makes all agents need true beliefs with *B*-truth-conditions that vary over time and space. Without them we could not time or place the myriad actions which, if they are to get us what we want, must be done at the right *B*-time and right *B*-place. True *B*-beliefs alone, precisely because they are true always and everywhere, cannot tell us when or where to act.” (Mellor, 1998, p. 66)

## Roman Altshuler

<sup>7</sup> There is some reason to be skeptical here: there are plenty of surviving species that, most likely, have no tensed beliefs whatsoever. This again suggests that the experience of time is not, at bottom, a matter of having beliefs.

<sup>8</sup> Not everyone is convinced, of course. If tense involves a semantic contradiction in reality that leads us to reject the A-series, why don't similar contradictions apply to our tensed beliefs? That is, it seems impossible to preserve irreducible and true A-beliefs while sticking to a B-theory. (Ludlow, 1999)

<sup>9</sup> See Williams (1979) for the classic statement that having reasons involves having desires. I think the claim becomes significantly more solid if we keep in mind two features: first, that "desire" is here a stand-in for a wide class of mental states (pro-attitudes, in Davidson's terminology, or members of an agent's motivational set, in Williams's). Second, that the claim need not be that the prior existence of desires is necessary for reasons to exist – instead, the reasons might give rise to desires. This suffices, I believe, to respond to such criticisms as those raised by Nagel (1970) or Korsgaard (1986).

<sup>10</sup> This is the problem of deviant causal chains.

<sup>11</sup> I use "object" here in a broad sense – the object of a desire is an intentional object, which need not be a particular thing, but can be a state of affairs or even just an action.

<sup>12</sup> This is not, of course, meant to suggest that representing an action as future is *all* that is needed to explain how desires or intentions can cause an action. The point is only that unless they *do* so represent the object, they cannot cause an action in the way that desires or intentions do cause actions.

<sup>13</sup> Or, rather, of causing an action directly and in the right way. It might cause some action in the wrong way – for example, the desire might make me so unhappy that I start crying. Or it might cause other actions indirectly – by solidifying my resolve never to do that stupid thing again. A related point is that I can desire something past – for example, that I were back in my last relationship. But if it is not a mere wish, this desire is a desire for something future – to restore the relationship.

<sup>14</sup> It should be added that my argument is, obviously, not merely an appeal to the asymmetry between cause and effect; that would be most as likely to serve as an argument for B-theory as for A-theory. Rather, my claim is that in understanding agency, we have to recognize A-properties as built in to (at least) one of the causes.

<sup>15</sup> This is not to say that no beliefs need be involved in our having causally effective desires. It is certainly impossible to desire – at least in a causally effective way – something that one has no knowledge of. I cannot, for example, desire a vacation in Paris if I have never heard of Paris. And knowledge of the object of desire may well include beliefs about that object. But these beliefs have no bearing on the temporal fact of the representation.

<sup>16</sup> Of course one could argue that without B-properties, desires and intentions could never meet their conditions of satisfaction. But even if this were right, it would still leave their A-properties untouched.

<sup>17</sup> But it may well be, as Bachelard (1950) once suggested, that the flow of time is only a higher order experience, which we construct intellectually out of more basic particulars.

<sup>18</sup> Though we can drop the C-series altogether, since the elements central to it are already included in the B-series.

### References

- Bachelard, Gaston. (1950/2000). *The Dialectic of Duration*. Mary McAllester Jones (trans.). Manchester: Clinamen.
- Barbour, Julian. (1999). *The End of Time*. New York: Oxford University Press.



## *Agency and the A-Series*

- Craig, William Lane. (2001). Wishing it Were Now Some Other Time. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 62: 159-166.
- Davidson, Donald. (1963/1980). Actions, Reasons, and Causes. In *Essays on Actions and Events*. Oxford: Clarendon.
- Korsgaard, Christine. (1986). Skepticism About Practical Reason. *Journal of Philosophy* 83: 5-25.
- LePoidevin, Robin. (2006). Memory and the A-Series. In Friedrich Stadler and Michael Stöltzner (eds.), *Time and History* (pp. 31-42). Frankfurt: Ontos Verlag.
- Ludlow, Peter. (1999). *Semantics, Tense, and Time*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- McTaggart, J.E. (1908). The Unreality of Time. *Mind* 18: 457-74.
- Mellor, D. H. (1998). *Real Time II*. London: Routledge.
- . (2001). The Time of Our Lives. In Anthony O’Hear (ed.), *Philosophy at the New Millennium* (pp. 45-60). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Nagel, Thomas. (1970). *The Possibility of Altruism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Prior, A. N. (1959). Thank Goodness That’s Over. *Philosophy* 34: 12-17.
- Searle, John. (2001). *Rationality in Action*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Smith, Quentin. (1985). The Mind-Independence of Temporal Becoming. *Philosophical Studies* 47: 109-119.
- Smith, Quentin. (1988). The Phenomenology of A-Time. *Dialogos* 23: 143-153.
- Williams, Bernard. (1979). Internal and External Reasons. In R. Harrison (ed.), *Rational Action: Studies in Philosophy and Social Science*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.