

BOOK REVIEW

Experiencing Time. BY SIMON PROSSER. (Oxford: OUP, 2016. Pp. xvi + 221. Price £40.00.)

Debates between partisans of the A- and B-theories of time can often strike outsiders as somewhat arcane. Fortunately, Prosser has done an admirable job of making his argument, which concerns the nature of our experience of time and the implications thereof for the A-theory and the B-theory, accessible to non-specialist readers, beginning, in ch. 1, with some essential background on the metaphysics of time. The chapter discusses a number of versions of the A-theory, according to which time has a dynamic character and genuinely passes, before reviewing the B-theory, according to which time does not pass.

Prosser himself favours the B-theory, and ch. 2, perhaps the most provocative chapter of the book, is devoted to critiquing the most influential argument for the A-theory, which turns on the idea that our experience of time itself tells us that time passes. Against this argument, Prosser maintains, first, that we do not and could not even in principle experience the passage of time and, second, that we therefore do not in fact genuinely understand the A-theoretic claim that time passes. Prosser's view here is surprising (or at least it was to this non-specialist reader), but he makes a convincing case for it. After considering a number of distinct B-theoretic arguments, including an argument from the claim that we have no experience of ontic becoming (where ontic becoming is the coming into existence of things), an argument based on the phi phenomenon (in which a dynamic experience is produced by static stimuli), and an argument designed to undermine the thought that the B-theory cannot explain why we only ever experience one specific moment in time, he sets out his novel 'detector' and 'multidetector' arguments. The core idea of the detector argument is that, because the A-theory and the B-theory do not disagree about which physical events occur, there can be no physical system that detects the alleged passage of time. Given plausible assumptions about the relation of the mental to the physical, this implies that the mind likewise cannot detect the passage of time and therefore that we have no veridical experience of the passage of time. The multidetector argument turns on similar

considerations, and the arguments together are meant to establish that there could not even in principle be a veridical experience of time passing. Arguing from a range of theories of representation, he then maintains, more strongly, that experience cannot even falsely represent the passage of time, i.e. that experience cannot represent the passage of time at all. The final section of the chapter then argues that, given the foregoing considerations, the A-theoretic claim that time passes is effectively meaningless.

Turning from our experience of time to our attitudes to the past and the future, Prosser begins ch. 3 by dismissing the date theory and the token-reflexive theory as accounts of these attitudes, on the ground that they do not deal adequately with Prior's 'thank goodness' argument; the key idea here is that they do not explain how the B-theorist can account for the different attitudes that we take to past events, as opposed to future events. He then introduces a person-reflexive theory, according to which, while 'past' and 'future' appear to predicate properties of times or events, they in fact refer to two-place relations between times or events and person-stages; the key idea is that to think of an event as past or future is to think of it in an implicitly first-personal way. Taking up the question of why we should have different attitudes towards the past and the future, Prosser introduces the notion of a subject-environment functional (SEF) relation. SEF relations, like Gibsonian affordances, concern the subject's possibilities for interaction with his environment. The chapter concludes by suggesting that truth-conditions for beliefs about past and future events can be given in terms of SEF relations, a suggestion that Prosser develops further in later chapters.

In ch. 4, Prosser turns from attitudes back to experience, taking up our experience of rates and durations. Events are experienced as taking place at a rate and as having a duration. In order to explain this, Prosser assumes intentionalism, the view that the phenomenal character of an experience is determined by its content, and argues, on the basis of a 'Slow Earth' thought experiment, for functionalist intentionalism, according to which phenomenal characters essentially represent SEF relations. Time is also sometimes experienced as passing more quickly or more slowly. In order to explain this, Prosser appeals again to SEF relations, arguing that, because a subject's possibilities for interaction with his environment vary with, for example, his level of alertness, the nature of his experience of the rate of passage of time is also bound to vary. Chapter 5 then considers another aspect of experience. Many have argued that, because we experience change, the 'now' of experience must itself be temporally extended. Prosser is critical of the notion of a specious present and initially seems to favour an alternative dynamic snapshot theory of experience. Ultimately, however, he claims that there may be no fact of the matter about whether the dynamic snapshot theory or the Jamesian specious present better accounts for our experience of change, in the sense that they may turn out to be empirically equivalent.

In ch. 6, Prosser takes on the widespread view that the A-theory is better able to explain why change seems dynamic than is the B-theory, which acknowledges only ‘at-at’ change (in which an entity has certain properties *at a given time* and different properties *at another time*). He argues that the B-theorist is able to account for the experience of dynamic change but that doing so requires him to claim that experience has a necessarily false content, since it misleadingly represents objects as enduring through changes. Chapter 7 then considers our experience of moving through time. Prosser takes for granted that we inevitably think of past and future in spatial terms, with ‘future’ mapping onto ‘in front of’ and ‘past’ onto ‘behind’, and argues that this can be explained in terms of SEF relations, since a subject’s possibilities for action with respect to an event change with its subjective degree of futurity. Prosser seems to be right that we inevitably think of temporal relations in terms of spatial relations; interestingly, however, there is some evidence that the tendency to map ‘future’ onto ‘in front of’ and ‘past’ onto ‘behind’ may not quite be universal (Núñez and Sweetser 2006).

I cannot say whether this particular point poses a problem for Prosser’s argument, though I would, in general, have liked to see greater engagement with relevant empirical work on subjective time. This is, however, a minor criticism: if Prosser’s arguments are primarily a priori in character, he is sensitive to empirical evidence at key points, and his a priori arguments are themselves developed in a style that manages to achieve an admirable combination of rigour and accessibility, making for a book that can be read with profit both by specialists and by non-specialists.

REFERENCE

- Núñez, R. E. and E. Sweetser, (2006) ‘With the Future Behind Them: Convergent Evidence from Aymara Language and Gesture in the Crosslinguistic Comparison of Spatial Construals of Time’, *Cognitive Science*, 30: 401–50.

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