

The Illusion of the Experience of the Passage of Time

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Abstract

Supporters of the A-theory of time sometimes refer to an alleged experience of the passage of time in support of their theory. In this paper I argue that it is an illusion that we experience the passage of time, for such an experience is impossible. My argument relies on the general assertion that experience is contingent, in the sense that if it is possible to experience the passage of time, it is also possible to experience that time does not pass. Having established this claim, I argue that it is impossible to experience that time does not pass, and hence that it is impossible to experience the passage of time.

Keywords

Experience, Hume, Kant, passage of time, Wittgenstein

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In the continuing debate on the nature of time, between supporters of the A-theory of time and supporters of the B-theory of time, the status of the passage of time holds a center place. A-theorists maintain that the continual change in the attributes of past, present and future, which constitutes the passage (or 'flow') of time, is essential to time, and distinguish the temporal dimension from the spatial dimensions. B-theorists, on the other hand, deny the objectivity of these attributes, and maintain that the 'passage of time' is merely an illusion.

In this debate, an important consideration in support of the A-theory of time, which poses a major challenge for supporters of the B-theory of time, is found in the alleged human experience of the passage of time. It seems undeniable that we all experience the pas-

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sage of time, and the existence of such an experience constitutes a *prima facie* strong reason in support of the reality of the passage of time, and therefore of the A-theory of time (see, for example, Craig 2000: 138; van Inwagen 2002: 64).

The alleged experience of the passage of time poses a challenge for the B-Theorist. To begin with, it seems that the B-theory of time leaves out an important aspect of reality, as experienced by us. Furthermore, a notable obstacle for a B-theory account of this experience lies in the fact that the claim that an experience of the passage of time is illusion seems to run into the same difficulty as the claim that time is an illusion. The claim that a certain experience is illusory presupposes a gap between experience and what is experienced. However, since time is a feature of our experience, if we experience things as temporal, time is real in the sense that it is a characteristic of our experience (Dummett 1960: 503). Similarly, if we experience time as it passes, the passage of time must be a feature of our experience and therefore the passage of time is real.

Recently, Skow 2011 criticized specific arguments which attempt to establish the reality of the passage of time based on experience. This strategy, however, fails to discredit the general attempt to establish the truth of the A-theory of time based on our experience; it also does not dispel the air of mystery which surrounds time, and our experience of it.

In this paper I argue that it is merely an illusion that we experience the passage of time. I do not argue that the experience of the passage of time is an illusion in the sense that it does not correctly reflect physical reality. I argue that it is an illusion that people have such experience, and furthermore, that it is impossible to experience of the passage of time.

The claim that there is nothing in our experience that cannot be explained by the B-theory of time is not new. Similar claims have been recently advanced by Prosser 2007 and Dainton 2011. I see merits in both arguments, and shall not endeavor to discredit any previous attempts to argue to similar conclusions, but simply advance my own argument. I believe that the argument I present in this paper is simpler, relies on less controversial premises, and helps to dispel the cloud of mystery which surrounds our experience of time.

In the following section I discuss the general strategy I employ

and present a general outline of the structure of my argument. In sections 3 and 4 I argue for each of the two premises of my argument respectively. In section 5 I summarize the conclusion of my paper.

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The assertion that we are mistaken in thinking that we experience the passage of time may seem paradoxical, if not a straightforward contradiction. This is certainly the case for those who maintain that first person beliefs regarding mental states are incorrigible, and even more so for those who believe that they are infallible.

There is similar claim, regarding a subject's awareness of its self, which can both clarify my claim as well as the general strategy I employ in order to show that the experience of the passage of time is an illusion. I am referring to Hume's claim that an individual's impression of his or her self is an illusion (Hume 1740: 251-2). Obviously, not any impression of the self will do. Hume is talking about an impression of the self as the direct subject of experience, rather than, for example, an impression of the self as a physical object in the world.

Hume famously asks us not to assume that such an impression exists, but actually look for this elusive impression. However, Hume does not rest his case merely on a factual claim, according to which we do not, as a matter of contingent fact, experience anything which can be identified as an impression of the self, qua the subject of that experience. He sometimes suggests a stronger line of reasoning, which implies that it is impossible to have such an impression. Hume maintains that all our impressions are separable, in the sense that it makes sense to claim that they may exist separately without contradiction (Hume 1978: 634). This implies that it is always possible to imagine that any particular impression does not exist. This, however, implies an absurdity in the case of an impression of the self. For this impression is supposed to be a necessary condition for identifying the self. Hence, in order to identify that 'I have no impression of the self,' it is necessary to first identify that it is *I*, that is, the self, and this is possible only with the help of an impression of the self. In summary, there can be no impression of the self, qua the subject of that experience, for such an impression would need to be a necessary

impression, but for Hume all impressions are contingent.

A similar idea is found in Kant's analysis of self-consciousness in the transcendental deduction of the categories, which appears in the first edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Kant suggests that the attempt to look for an impression of the self, as the basis of self-consciousness, involves a misunderstanding of the logical structure of self-consciousness. This is reflected in his claim that due to the necessity which is involved in the notion of the self, it cannot be represented through empirical data (Kant 1781: A107).

A similar idea can also be found in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, when he explains the inability to find the metaphysical subject in the world by referring to the contingent nature of our experience (Wittgenstein 1921: 5.633-5.634). I do not find it surprising, in light of this and other considerations found the *Tractatus*, that Wittgenstein dismisses 'the passage of time' with a quick remark, 'There is no such thing' (Wittgenstein 1921: 6.3611). I shall return to this point in what follows.

My strategy in this paper is similar to the one followed by Hume, Kant, and Wittgenstein, with regard to the case of the impression of the self. I argue for the impossibility of experiencing the passage of time based on the logical impossibility of experiencing that time does not pass. I advance my argument in two stages. First I argue for the general claim that experience is contingent, in the sense that it must be possible, for any proposition which describes the content of an actual experience, to experience its negation. Having established this claim, I argue that it is impossible to experience that time does not pass. The structure of my argument is therefore:

1. For every proposition ϕ , if it is possible to experience that ϕ , it is possible to experience that not- ϕ .
 2. It is impossible to experience that time does not pass.
- Therefore,
3. It is impossible to experience that time passes.

This argument is valid, and therefore the question of its soundness rests on the truth of its premises. I argue for the truth of premise 1 in the next section of my paper. In section 4 I argue for the truth of premise 2.

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According to premise 1, if it is impossible to experience that not- p , it is impossible to experience that p . There are two ways to explain that impossibility of experiencing that not- p . The first is to show that p is a necessary truth, the second is to show that p describes a necessary condition for experience. As becomes apparent in the next section, both ways of explaining the impossibility of experiencing that not- p are relevant for explaining the impossibility of experiencing that time does not pass.

The simplest case is the one in which p is a necessary truth, for example, a logical truth. In this case, it would be impossible to experience that not- p , because not- p would be self-contradictory. Contradictions cannot describe the content of our experience, just as they cannot describe reality.

The claim that it is impossible for contradictions to describe the content of our experience ('to experience contradictions') can be contested. Seeming counterexamples are found in M.C. Escher's work, in which impossible figures are drawn, and science fiction movies in which time travelers change the past (Lowe 2000: 11-13). However, if the content of experience, while watching these alleged counterexamples, is accurately described, no contradiction can be found. The contradiction is only found in the projection of what it experienced: in the translation of the two dimensional figures into a representation of three dimensional figures, and translation of a linear plot of a movie into time loops.

The second way to explain the impossibility of experiencing not- p appeals to the logically necessary conditions of experience. Thus, even if the proposition 'not- p ' is contingent, the necessary conditions of experience make it logically impossible (rather than merely psychologically impossible) to experience that not- p . An example for this kind of impossibility is experiencing that something exists without being experienced by the subject (see, for example, Berkeley 1710: 91 (paragraph 23)). This is the reason why our experience does not include ourselves as the subjects of this experience.

In order to justify premise 1, it should first be noted that necessity is not a feature which can characterize our conscious experience. Our experience is always of the form ' a experiences that p ,' and nev-

er of the logical form ‘ a experiences that necessarily p .’ This idea is not new, and appears most notably in the writings of Hume and Kant (see for example Hume 1740: 77; Kant 1781: B3). The point that emerges from their arguments is that it is a categorical mistake to search a feature of our conscious experience (‘impression’) which corresponds to the idea of necessity. Necessity is an abstract feature of propositions, rather than a tangible feature which can meaningfully be said to characterize conscious experience.

So far I have established the claim that the content of our experience is never of the logical form ‘ a experiences that necessarily p ,’ rather than that it is impossible to experience p if it impossible to experience that not- p . However, the latter claim follows from the former. For the claim that the content of our experience is never of the logical form ‘ a experiences that necessarily p ’ implies that experience can never teach us that something is necessary. Experience must therefore always leave open the possibility of experiencing that things are different from the way in which they are in fact experienced. Otherwise, experience could have taught us that something is necessarily so – namely, that things cannot be *experienced* otherwise than the way they are – contrary to the premise that experience can teach us only how things actually are, but not that things are necessarily so. Hence, a necessary condition for experiencing that p is the possibility of experiencing that not- p (premise 1).

This claim does not preclude the category of necessary a posteriori truths, as suggested, for example, by Kripke 1980. Take, for example, the proposition that water is H_2O . According to Kripke this is a necessary truth, learned from experience. However, the term ‘experience’, in this context, is used in this context to describe empirical data in general, rather than a feature of our conscious experience of reality. This is clear from the possibility of a substance which has a different atomic structure, but resembled water in appearance, that is, in the way it is experienced by us (Kripke 1980: 128). The necessity which is supposedly involved in the identity of water and H_2O is cannot be identified as a feature of our conscious experience, although might be supported by empirical data.

Notwithstanding this line of reasoning, in support of the premise 1, it might seem that there is an obvious counterexample to this principle. Suppose that p is a necessary truth. Although one might agree

that experience does not teach us that p is a necessary truth, it might be argued that it still can teach us that p is true, and that is all that is required in order for p to describe the content of this experience.

Take for instance the logical truth, 'either I am in pain now or I am not in pain now.' According to premise 1 it is possible to experience that 'I am in pain now or I am not in pain now.' For, according to this premise it is only possible to experience that 'either I am in pain now or I am not in pain now' if it is possible to experience that 'it is not true that 'either I am in pain now or I am not in pain now'.' However, the latter proposition is a contradiction, and therefore impossible to experience. Hence it follows from premise 1 that it is impossible to experience that 'I am in pain now or I am not in pain now.'

This implication of premise 1 might seem problematic. One objection that can be raised against premise 1 is based on the idea that mental states are transparent to the subject of these mental states. It might be argued, for example, that if the proposition 'I am in pain now or I am not in pain now' accurately describes a subject's experience, it would also be accurate to say that the subject experiences that 'he is in pain or that he is not in pain.'

However, this objection loses its power once it is remembered that mental states, including experience, are intensional. It is possible, for example, for a subject to see the smiling president, but to fail to see that 'the president is smiling,' simply because he does not know that the person he or she sees is the president. Similarly, although the subject may feel that he is in pain, it would be false to say that he or she is feeling that 'I am is not in love, or that I am in love and in pain,' simply because he or she fails to realize that this proposition follows from the proposition 'I am in pain'. Similarly, a subject may also fail to recognize that the proposition 'I am in pain now or I am not in pain now' is true, and hence, although it would be true that the subject feels that he is in pain, it would be false that he feels that he is in pain or he is not in pain.

However, it might be argued that although the subject may not be aware of the truth of a tautology, surely he *can* be aware of its truth based on his experience. For example, a subject who feels pain can infer, based on his experience, that 'I am in pain now or I am not in pain now.' Obviously, one does not have to rely on one's experience

to recognize the truth of this proposition, and one may fail to recognize the truth of this proposition altogether. However, surely it is at least *possible* to recognize its truth based only on his or her experience. Think of a subject who fails to recognize that this proposition is a logical truth, and relies on introspection to determine its truth value. Surely, it might be argued, in this case it is justified to say that the subject experiences that 'I am in pain now or I am not in pain now.'

I believe the mistake in this objection lies in its transition from 'knows, based in experience, that *p*' to 'experiences that *p*.' To begin with, it is possible to know, based on experience, about things we never experience. If it was not the case, I could never learn that my wife is home, without seeing or hearing her, based on seeing her coat on the clothes hanger.

It might be objected that this example is irrelevant to the case which is currently under consideration. For the proposition 'I am in pain now or I am not in pain now' logically follows from the proposition 'I am in pain now,' which accurately describes the content of the subject's experience. This fact, it might be argued, shows that what is described by the proposition 'I am in pain now or I am not in pain now' does not go beyond anything that the subject experiences directly, and hence it is justified to say that the subject experiences that 'I am in pain now or I am not in pain now.'

According to this contention, if a subject experiences that *p*, the subject also experiences everything that logically follows from *p*. This claim is false. To begin with, as mentioned before, mental states are intensional. Hence it does not follow, from the premises that *a* believes that *p*, and that *q* follows from *p*, that *a* believes that *q*. Similarly, it does not follow from the premises that *a* experiences that *p*, and that *q* follows from *p*, that *a* experiences that *q*.

Furthermore, a necessary condition for the legitimacy of this inference is that both *p* and *q* describe the same state of affairs. However, not every proposition *q*, which follows from proposition *p*, describes the same state of affairs as *p*. Without committing to any general theory of the nature of states-of-affairs, it is obvious that a necessary condition for two propositions to describe the same state of affairs is that they are logically equivalent. This is clearly not the case with the propositions 'I am in pain now' and 'I am in pain now

or I am not in pain now,' because the first is contingent while the latter is a necessary truth. Hence, they cannot possibly describe the same thing.

It should also be noted that if it is meaningful to describe the content of experience with the help of necessary truths, the content of every experience is correctly described with the help of every necessary truth. For the proposition 'I am in pain now or I am not in pain now,' like any other necessary truth, follows not only from the proposition 'I am in pain now,' but from any proposition. This conclusion is clearly false in the case of complex logical truths, which the subject is not even aware of the fact that they are necessary truths.

Another troubling implication of the contention that any experience is accurately described by every necessary truth (which follows from the idea that a subject's experience can be described with the help of necessary truths) is the troubling implication that a subject's experience includes an awareness of an infinite number of necessary truths. Moreover, in an attempt to overcome this troubling implication, it is always possible to argue that the seeming difficulty of this implication is explained by the false premise that each different necessary truth describes a different fact which the subject experiences. However, it might be argued, all necessary truths describe a single fact. Again, without resorting to any general theory of individuating facts, the logical equivalence of all necessary truths may support such a claim. However, rather than convince us that all necessary truths describe the same mysterious fact, this may very well convince us that Wittgenstein was right in his claim that necessary truths say nothing, that is, that they describe no fact at all, and therefore cannot describe anything which we experience (Wittgenstein 1921: 4.461, 4.462, 6.11). Indeed, this may even convince us to accept Wittgenstein's position that logical truths cannot be confirmed by experience (Wittgenstein 1921: 6.1222).

What follows from these considerations is that the content of experience can only be described with the help of contingent propositions, for example p , so that it is always possible to experience that things are different from the way they are, that is, that it is always possible to experience that not- p .

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Having established the first premise of the argument, it is time to turn the attention to premise 2:

2. It is impossible to experience that time does not pass.

In what follows I argue for the truth of this premise by eliminating any possible explanation for experiencing that time does not pass. There seem to be only two such allegedly-possible explanations. The first is that of experiencing a temporal reality in time does not pass. Obviously, an A-theorist would deny that this is possible, for according to the A-theory of time the passage of time is a necessary condition for temporality. Hence, according to the A-theory of time, it is only possible to experience that time does not pass if it is possible to experience that there is not time at all. This leads us to the second possible explanation for experiencing that time does not pass. If it is possible to experience that reality is atemporal, such an experience is *ipso facto* an experience that time does not pass.

To begin with the first option, the question is whether it is possible to experience time without a passage of time. The passage of time is characterized by a change in the attributes of past, present, and future. An event is first in the future, then in the present, and finally in the past. Hence, an experience of time without a passage of time is either an experience whose content allows no use for the distinctions between past, present and future, or an experience whose content is characterized by static attributes of past, present and future, that is, attributes that does not change in time.

It is very difficult to see how can there be any temporal experience which does not allow a use of the distinctions between past, present and future. According to the A-theory of time it is impossible to experience time without these distinctions, since according to this theory it is a change in these attributes which constitutes time. According to the B-theory of time, on the other hand, these distinctions are subjective, and indicate the temporal position of events relative to the use of these distinctions, as suggested, for example, by the new tenseless theory of time, first suggested by Mellor 1981 and Smart 1980. There is no need, for the purpose of this discussion,

to commit to any specific version of this theory (the ‘token-reflexive version’ or the ‘date-version’). It is sufficient to recall that we find a use for the distinction between left and right although no one would suggest that this distinction is anything but subjective. Similarly, it seems that distinctions which indicate the temporal position of an event relative to a point of view from which reality is described are always possible if experience is temporal, that is, if the content of experience is described with the help of the temporal relations ‘before’ and ‘simultaneous with’.

The other option for experiencing time without passage is that the content of experience is characterized by static attributes of past, present and future, that is, attributes that do not change in time. However, this description is contradictory. For in order to experience something as static, one must experience that it does not change as time changes. However, if time is experienced as changing, say from time t' to t'' , and experience includes the distinctions between past, present, and future, it is *ipso facto* an experience of a change in these attributes. For it follows from this description, for example, that time t' , which was present, is now past.

It might be objected that it is possible for the content of a subject’s temporal experience to remain constant in time. Take for example the content of my present experience. It is a temporal experience, which includes the distinctions between past, present, and future. Suppose that the content of my present experience remains constant for 5 minutes. Surely, it can be argued, this constitutes a temporal experience which is described by a static attributes of past, present and future.

The answer to this objection is that it would be false to conclude from this description that the *content* of this hypothetical experience is characterized by static attributes of past present and future. Surely, the criterion for deciding this is the way in which the subject would describe his experience, and the subject would not be able to describe his experience as static. For in order to experience these attributes as static the subject must be aware that time changes while they remain constant. However, due to the fact that the content of his experience remains constant, the subject would fail to notice the change in time, and therefore would fail to experience any static attributes of past, present and future.

It can be therefore concluded that it is impossible to experience time without a passage of time. The only other option for explaining the possibility of experiencing that time does not pass is that of experiencing that there is no time at all. This experience is *ipso facto* an experience that time does not pass.

Notice that what is required here is to experience that there is no time, rather than a lack of experience of time. For what we are looking for is an awareness of the lack of something, such as a lack of hunger, which supposedly describes the content of our experience. But what would it be to experience a lack of time – in the sense that we can be said to experience a lack of hunger?

In order to attempt to describe such an experience, it is helpful to first attempt to describe an atemporal reality. An atemporal reality can be thought of as a possible world which is comprised of one and only one instant of our reality, that is, the actual world, similarly to a single frame taken from a motion picture film. It is possible for a subject to experience this possible world as atemporal?

The answer is negative. It is impossible to experience that there is no time. For in order for experience to teach us that there is no time, it cannot be instantaneous. If experience is limited to a single instant in time, it is impossible to tell from this experience whether there are other moments in time or not. Hence, experience cannot teach us that there is no time. As we can see, at most experience can be limited to an instant, but this does not qualify as an experience that there is no time.

The second option for describing that time does not pass is hence eliminated, and the second premise of my argument is thus substantiated. It is impossible to experience that time does not pass.

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Having established the two premises of the argument, the argument is proven to be sound, and the conclusion, that it is impossible to experience that time passes, shown to be true. It is therefore only an illusion that we experience the passage of time.

It should be stressed that the conclusion of this paper is not that the experience of the passage of time is an illusion in the sense that it does not correctly reflect physical reality. It is an illusion in the sense

that it does not describe an possible experience. This conclusion does not therefore discredit the A-theory of time. It does, however, eliminate a putative consideration in support of this theory.

Far from tracking the elusive experience of the passage of time, the conclusion is that not only it is impossible to experience the flow of time, it is impossible to experience time itself, as Kant famously insisted (see, for example, Kant 1781: B219). The previous section of this essay shows that it is impossible to experience that there is no time, and therefore, according to the principle which is formulated in premise 1 of my argument, it is also impossible to experience that there is time. It is therefore only an illusion that we are all experiencing a unique feature of reality, that is, the passage of time, or indeed that we ever experience time itself.

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