

Everything flows

The passing of time is standardly accepted as an undeniable feature of experience.

Defenders of the A-theory of time, a dynamic theory that defends passage of time as a mind-independent feature of reality, have argued that the rival B-theory, who takes time to be static, is incompatible with our experience of passage.

In the paper “Time, Passage and Immediate Experience” (forthcoming) Barry Dainton argues against this view. He argues that not only can the B-theory give an account for these experiences, but also that A-theories have no advantage when it comes to explaining them. The idea is that, if time were passing, it could not contribute anything to our experience of it as flowing. The argument is based on the following premises:

1. We cannot experience “empty” time. We experience time in virtue of perceiving change and persistence and the dynamic of these experiences accounts for our experience of time as passing. For some thing to persist or change, that thing has to exist at least at two (adjacent) instants. Consequently the perception of change and persistence requires the perception of what pertains to at least two instants. Most theories of temporal perception argue that we can only perceive what pertains to one instant and that we do not directly perceive change and persistence. Therefore, on most temporal experience accounts an experience of change given static time would be indistinguishable from an experience of the same content, given dynamic time.

2. Dainton’s overlap theory (OT) argues that we can perceive contents that pertain to more than one instant at once. Assuming OT, the fact that time passes ought to contribute to our experiences of change. In other words, if time were static our (OT-) experience of change ought to be different from the same experience if time were passing.

3. This is not the case: even given OT, our experiences would be indistinguishable.

Conclusion: Even if time passes, (real) passage can not contribute anything to experiential passage.

I argue that the argument is valid wrt the B-theory and its ability to account for experiential passage. Nevertheless it reveals devastating implications of OT: It is *only* compatible with the static B-theory of time. According to OT, experience of passage is accounted for by:

- a) the aspectuality of experience: we can only perceive what pertains to some moments (those within one temporal perspective, duration of a specious present)
- b) change of temporal perspective
- c) direct experience of change within the temporal perspective

Problem pertains to c): The idea of direct change requires that the phenomenal present is extended, whereas standardly the metaphysical present is regarded as instantaneous. Even if we grant the extended present, the consequences of Dainton’s argument turn out different than expected, because there cannot be change within an extended metaphysical present.