

Transparency, Time, and Perspective: Reply to Richardson, Carter and Lee

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I am very grateful to Louise, Elliot and Geoffrey for their comments. It feels a bit like receiving a set of reviewers' reports, but it's a much more pleasant experience when the paper in question has already been accepted. Thanks also to Aaron Henry and the rest of the team behind the Brains Blog for making this symposium possible.

Elliot Carter

The notion of transparency in the title of my paper refers to the idea that when we try to focus on the nature of our own perceptual experiences our attention in fact lands on the objects they are experiences of, and on the properties of those objects, rather than on properties possessed by our experiences themselves. (I say more about how exactly I understand transparency in my reply to Richardson.) In the paper, I allow that there are certain properties that are arguably possessed by our experiences themselves, rather than by the things that are being experienced, that form exceptions to transparency. One such property is the spatial viewpointness of visual experience – the fact that, when we look at an array of objects, we see them in a particular way, which also allows for other ways in which the same objects could be seen, if they were seen from other locations. This is an introspectable property that my experience itself possesses. I also claim, though, that the idea of the transparency of experience applies to temporal features of experience 'in its strongest form', because perceptual experience is not similarly temporally viewpointed. The 'time from which' I experience things – the temporal location of my experience – is not similarly an introspectable property that forms part of the phenomenology of the experience.

Carter questions this last claim, effectively arguing that there are two different issues that I conflate with one another. He agrees that “the temporal features we experience in perception don’t appear to us in a variable manner” (Carter, p. 3) as spatial features do in visuospatial perception (call this ‘variability’). Yet, he thinks that this does not rule out that the perspective from which things are experienced, temporally speaking, figures in the phenomenology of experience as an introspectable item (call this ‘perspective’). As a supposed analogy, he mentions the sense of touch. Touch is not a distal sense, and we can feel objects only where they are in contact with our body. But whilst that means that the location of the surface of the felt object is always the same as the one at which it is felt, these two locations still figure in the phenomenology of our experience as separate ingredients, and we can switch attention between them.

I do find the comparison with the sense of touch a very interesting one. On a four-dimensionalist picture of reality there is indeed a sense in which the four-dimensional space-time ‘worm’ constituting the perceiver experiences events at locations on its four-dimensional ‘body’. So I think there is a lot in that comparison that is worth exploring further. However, as I mention in footnote 19 of the paper, I still think there is a crucial difference. In particular, I’m not convinced that variability and perspective can be pulled apart from one another in the way envisaged by Carter. Note that, in the normal case of touch, we still have variability, though it comes in a different form. As in vision, in order to describe the nature of the experience, it is not enough simply to speak of the objects that are being experienced, because there are different ways in which one and the same object can be experienced, depending on which part of our body we touch it with. This is how the location of the experience makes a difference to the nature of the experience itself, how it enters into its phenomenology. But there is not equivalent to this in the temporal case.

Carter seems to implicitly acknowledge this, as he uses a hypothetical example of a case of touch in which the experiencer can only make contact with external things at one spatial point. I guess the point I'm trying to make is that, by taking variability out of the picture in this way, we also lose the motivation for thinking that there is perspective, i.e. that the location of the experience itself figures in experience as a distinct ingredient in its phenomenology.

I'll say more that might be relevant here in my reply to Richardson, but I just want to highlight here that the dispute, as I see it, is not about whether "the temporal location of our perspective is conceptually distinct from the apparent temporal location of what we perceive", as Carter puts it at one point (Carter, p. 4). My claim about the lack of temporal viewpointness in experience is meant to be specifically a claim about the phenomenology of experience. There is of course, a sense in which perceptual experience might also be said to involve a temporal 'perspective' in so far as, at each point in time, experience takes in less of the world than there is of the world – i.e. only what is then present. And because we're also equipped with the ability to remember and anticipate other times, we can become aware that our experience is 'perspectival' in this sense. But its being so is not part of the phenomenology of the experience itself. That is to say, the point in time from which things are being experienced does not contribute to what it is like to have the experience.

This relates, I believe, to another issue Carter raises, which is whether the dispute between my view and the alternative he sketches – which he thinks might ultimately be a stalemate – matters. He thinks it does, because philosophers who endorse such an alternative conception of temporal transparency have appealed to it in arguing for substantive claims about the metaphysical nature of experience, whereas he takes it that my account doesn't allow for drawing similar such inferences. This I am not so sure about. It is true that, on my account, the metaphysical nature of experience can't simply be read off from introspection.

But there might be other ways in which my account, too, has consequences for the metaphysics of experience. For instance, it could be that the only metaphysics of experience that can support the idea that experience puts the experiencer in a “special cognitive relation to the present moment”, in O’Shaughnessy’s words (O’Shaughnessy, 2000: 50, as quoted on p. 128 of my paper), but without this involving the equivalent of tense, is in fact one on which experience unfolds in time alongside what it is an experience of. This would still provide an argument for a particular metaphysical picture of experience, but one that does not rely on the idea that the metaphysical nature of perceptual experience is just introspectively obvious.

Carter also points out that a lack of temporal viewpointness can’t be all there is to what I call experiential presence in the paper – i.e., the distinct type of phenomenology possessed by perceptual or sensory experience – because a similar lack of temporal viewpointness can also be found in some non-perceptual mental states. He mentions sensory imagination, in particular. I agree that there is more that will have to be said about how perceptual experience is different, e.g., from imagination, to fully elucidate the particularly direct way in which perceptual experience puts us in touch with its objects. To take just one aspect of this issue, though, as Carter himself notes in a footnote, whilst imagination may inherit the lack of temporal viewpointness from perception, transparency is violated in another way in imagination. For we can distinguish the temporal features of what we imagine from temporal features of our act of imagining (and to this extent, the temporal characteristics of what we imagine are up to us: We can assign it a location in time, whether past, present or future, or we can simply leave that location undetermined).

I am also sympathetic to the suggestion Carter makes in closing, that the role perception has in guiding acting may have a key part to play in explaining the connection between experiential presence and temporal presence. However, this does not need to be seen

as a rival approach to the one I take in my paper. The lack of temporal viewpointness in perceptual experience may itself be bound up with the distinctively direct way in which perception guides action (on this, see my 2009, and also Grush, 2016).

Louise Richardson

Does experience have a felt temporal location? Like Carter, Richardson wants to develop an alternative answer to this question to the one I arrive at in my paper, but her answer differs in interesting ways from Carter's. She, too, uses an analogy, but in her case the analogy is with what a sense datum theorist would say about being able to perceive the colour of a worldly object by perceiving that of a sense datum. As she puts it, for the sense datum theorist, "in the one act of orange-seeing you are aware of the colour of the sense datum [...], and of the [object], and one is not able to discriminate – and so cannot identify – the orange of one and the orange of the other" (Richardson, p. 2). Similarly, then, we might say that perceptual experience does have a felt temporal location, but that one can attend to it only in attending to the temporal location of its objects. In so doing both the temporal location of the experience and that of its objects become objects of a single act of awareness.

Like Carter's comments, this suggestion from Richardson raises important issues about what we mean by transparency, and I probably did not say enough in the paper about the understanding of transparency that I was working with, which has to do with how the term figures in wider debates about the metaphysical nature of experience. As might already be clear from my reply to Carter, part of what motivated me to write the paper was what I saw as a puzzle about some of the existing debates over what are now typically referred to as extensionalist models of temporal experience. In those debates, it can sometimes look as though those defending extensionalism think its truth is directly obvious to introspection, or that it anyway seems to be true to us introspectively, and that this gives us good grounds for

endorsing it. And I take it that this would indeed be the case if the location (or at least the seeming location) of the experience itself was itself an ingredient in the phenomenology of the experience. If we can experience temporally extended goings-on, as we clearly can, and if, in doing so, our experiencing always occupies the same temporal location as what is experienced, then experiences must themselves be temporally extended.

Admittedly, I have defended a version of extensionalism myself, but I nevertheless think that things can't be quite that easy. To that extent I agree with Tye's insistence that the temporal features of experience are transparent, which he puts by saying that "[c]ontinuity, change and succession are experienced as features of the items experienced, not as features of experience" (Tye 2003: 97, as quoted on p. 132 of my paper). I take it that the notion of transparency in play here is one on which, for some property of experience *not* to be transparent is for introspection, on its own, to be able to ground claims about the existence and nature of that property. By contrast, in so far as Richardson's proposed alternative allows for the temporal location of experience to form an exception to transparency, it seems to me that there must be a different notion of transparency in play.

Consider again Richardson's analogy with the position of the sense datum theorist, according to which we can attend to sense data in the act of attending to the features of worldly objects, because we perceive the latter features by perceiving the features of those sense data. It seems to me that this is the position of someone who has come to believe on independent grounds that there are such things as sense data in the first place. If they think that we cannot discriminate the features of the sense data we have from features of the worldly objects we perceive, they must also think that introspection, on its own, cannot provide evidence for the existence of sense data. We must have some other reason for thinking that they exist.

Similarly, in the temporal case, if it is *de facto* true that the temporal location of one's experience coincides with that of the things experienced, there is of course a sense in which one can attend to the temporal location of one's experience by attending to that of the things one experiences. But this does not mean that the temporal location of experience forms an exception to transparency in the sense described above. It will only allow a subject to form beliefs about the temporal location of their experience if they are antecedently convinced that that location coincides with that of the things experienced. Introspection, on its own, won't be able to ground such a belief, and in this sense won't be able to deliver any insight into the properties of experience. To put the point differently, if all we had to go by was 'transparency' in Richardson's sense, we would be in precisely the predicament Carter thinks I am in (wrongly, as I think), of not being able to argue for a metaphysical view of experience on the basis of considerations about its phenomenology.

Another aspect of the paper that Richardson takes issue with is the sharp distinction I draw between the sense in which vision involves a spatial sensory field and the sense in which experience might also be said to involve a temporal sensory field, which determines what kinds of changes we can perceive and what kinds of changes are too slow for us to perceive them. In the paper, I describe the former as a structural feature of visuospatial experience, whereas I deny that the latter constitutes a structural feature of experience in the same sense, on the grounds that it is not a matter of how things are being perceived, but rather a matter of what we can and can't perceive.

If I understand her correctly, Richardson's argument is that there isn't as much of a difference as I make out in my paper, as both types of field constitute limitations, and in particular limitations that we can become aware of as something to do with us as perceivers, rather than the world we perceive. In the case of the case of visuospatial perception, I am aware, as part of my seeing things, that there are regions of space such that I cannot

(currently) see the things located in those regions. With respect to the temporal field, I take it Richardson would similarly say that, as part of my perceiving the world around me, I am aware that I can see some changes, but that some changes are too small or slow for me to perceive them. I am aware, that is, of a limit in the acuity of my experience with respect to detecting movement.

I think I can concede this point to Richardson, although I still think we are talking about a 'field' in two quite different senses. In the case of the visual field, there is a sense in which we are visually aware of the field as such, as a sub-region of the larger space in which we are located. In the case of the temporal field, by contrast, talk about a field seems to come in as part of an explanation as to why we can perceive only certain kinds of changes, and not others, rather than denoting something we are aware of as such.

Richardson also thinks, though, that allowing that there is thus at least this one structural property that experience has that relates to time will make it more difficult for me to hold onto the argument in section 3 of the paper, as to why the present moment in time seems objectively special. This I am not convinced by. I will say more about that argument in my reply to Lee, but for the moment I want to point out that, whilst I do make the broader claim in the paper that, temporally speaking, perceptual experience does not have structural properties, the argument regarding the seeming specialness of the present is meant to rely only on the claim that perceptual experience lacks temporal viewpointness. Because it does so, experience itself does not make manifest that more is required, other than the occurrence of an event, for that event to figure in our experience. And it might therefore come to seem to us that the events that do figure in our experience do so because they have a special property that past events no longer have and future events not yet do.

Geoffrey Lee

Towards the beginning of his comments, Lee raises an issue that concerns the very nature of the project I am engaged in in my paper. As I say at the beginning, part of the aim of my paper is to get clearer about an intuition articulated by a number of philosophers such as O'Shaughnessy and Valberg, which I put by saying that "it appears somehow essential to the nature of perceptual experience that it is the seeming disclosure of things as they are in the present" (p. 128). Lee, it appears, doesn't actually share that intuition in the first place. He thinks that the apparent connection between experiential presence and temporal presence that I seek to elucidate is just a contingent feature of our perceptual system.

The broader question in the background here is whether mere reflection on the phenomenology of experience can reveal modal truths about what the necessary features of that phenomenology are. I think that's a fascinating question, because I don't think the answer is obviously 'no'. Note, for instance, that, taking a stance like Lee's, we might equally question whether it is a necessary feature of episodic memory that there is a connection between an event's being remembered and its seeming to have happened in the past. But if both perception and memory are seen as things that might in principle range over the past as well as the present (and perhaps the future too), that might ultimately make it difficult to say what makes perceptual experience and episodic memory different kinds of mental state in the first place.

Taking Lee's specific claims, he points out that "our perceptual systems do make compensations for differing latencies" (Lee, p. 1), deriving either from the differences in the speed in which, say, distal auditory and visual stimuli reach our sense organs, or from differences in the speed in which they are processed. And he adds that, whilst our perceptual systems don't make this latency information available to us, "it's not difficult to conceive of systems that do make more explicit use of that information" (ibid.). This doesn't quite seem

to get at the issue, though, because it leaves open what ‘making use of that information’ is supposed to come to. As it stands, the way our perceptual system deals (to some extent) with latencies is by modulating when events presented in different modalities (visual vs. auditory, for instance) are experienced as happening (e.g. whether they are experienced as being simultaneous or not). This is clearly compatible with the idea that it is an essential feature of perceptual experience that experienced events seem present. So Lee’s claim must, more specifically, be the claim that there could be systems that make use of latency information by perceptually representing events as having happened at different temporal distances in the past. But this now starts to look more like a simple denial of the idea of a necessary connection between experiential presence and temporal presence, rather than an independent argument against that idea.

Some of what Lee goes on to say also made me realize that I should have spelled out further what I mean by saying that there is an intimate connection between experiential presence and temporal presence. The thought is that it is a key feature of perceptual experience that the events presented in experience are experienced as happening at the point in time that the experiencer also thinks of as the present. But this is not because there is something about the way they are experienced that marks them out as present; it is simply in virtue of those being the events that are experienced. That’s why I am saying that nothing analogous to tense features in perceptual experience. We might draw here a partial linguistic analogy to the idea of a primitive feature-placing language containing only sentences such as “It is raining”, “It smells of grass”, etc. (i.e., even more primitive than Strawson’s [1959] feature-placing sentences, which could contain indexicals). Sentences in such a language can only ever be used to talk about the location where the speaker is located, but not because there is something in those sentences that marks out that location – rather, simply because of

the type of sentences they are. I claim it's analogous with experiences and the temporal location of the experiencer.

In the paper, I claim that this feature of experience might also explain some of the phenomenological claims sometimes made on behalf of the A-theory of time, where it is said that temporally present events are experienced as 'occurring' in some special way that lends support to the idea that which events are present is an objective matter, rather than just a matter of perspective. As I argue, the fact that experience lacks temporal viewpointness means that experience itself is silent on what determines, at each moment, why we experience the events we do to the exclusion of others – i.e., that that moment simply also happens to be the moment when that experience is happening. And this might be why it might come to seem to us that it is something about the relevant events themselves, i.e. that they are in some way objectively privileged, that explains why it is just these events that figure in our experience.

Lee has three worries about this. First, he says that it seems wrong to say that there is no temporal analogue for our grasp of the spatial enabling conditions of perception. I'm happy to agree on this. We do of course know that, in order to perceptually experience an event, you have to be around, temporally speaking, to witness it. That much is clear from reflection on the difference between events we now experience and other events we can only remember or anticipate. My point is just that, as far as the phenomenology of perceptual experience itself is concerned, that fact is not manifest in the phenomenology as it is for the spatial equivalent. And this might be what explains why experience nevertheless exerts a pull on us to think that certain events, i.e. the ones we experience, are objectively special in the way that others are no longer or not yet. (Note that this oscillation between thinking of the present as perspectival and thinking of it as objective is itself a feature of A-theories of time,

in so far as the A-theorist wants to say both that the present moment in time is special, but also that each moment in time gets to be special in the same way when its turn comes.)

Lee's second worry is that there are numerous enabling conditions of perception, many of which we don't have much insight into, but this does not generally lead us to arrive at metaphysical conclusions. Here I realize that I should probably have said a bit more about what I mean by 'the enabling conditions of perception', and what specific such conditions I have in mind. As I mention in footnote 25, the background here are considerations such as the ones put forward by Evans in 'Things without the mind' (Evans, 1980) regarding our ability to grasp the mind-independence of the objects we encounter in perceptual experience. We conceive of the very objects we encounter in experience as ones that exist whether or not they are perceived, even though of course we can't perceive that they do so when they are not perceived. Crudely speaking, Evans's answer as to what grounds our grasp of this mind-independence of the relevant objects is that it is clear from the character of our experience of them that such experience requires not just the existence of the object, but also our being in the right position, making room for the possibility of the object existing unperceived. Thus, what count as the enabling conditions of perception in this story are conditions which explain why one and the same thing can both be an object of perception and fail to be an object of perception, and it is in this sense that my talk of enabling conditions of perception in the paper was meant to be read.

Apart from the spatial and temporal enabling conditions of perception, probably the main other category of enabling conditions of this kind are the ones mentioned last by Lee, which have to do with how well or not your perceptual processing functions. These are indeed also not manifest in the phenomenology of perceptual experience itself. But then it is instructive to look at what actually happens when, as Lee suggests, we start interfering with them to produce visual distortions. The upshot of this is precisely that you perceive the world

to be a different way; i.e. it looks to you as though the world itself was objectively different from the way it was before. You may of course realize that this is not how it actually is, and that your perceptual system is being played with. But that does not change the nature of your experience, which will still be as though the world was objectively a way it is not.

In a somewhat similar vein, I suggest that the lack of temporal viewpointness in experience makes it look like there is an objective change that events undergo as we experience them – for instance, that they come into and then go out of existence – rather than it simply looking as though the events themselves always stay the same, but that our relation to them changes over time. Again, we might of course not believe that this is how it really is, but this might not change the nature of our experience. (Note that part of what needs to be explained here is why even many B-theorists agree that the phenomenology of experience suggests an A-theoretical world.)

I should also say here, though, that I believe that the story I tell in the paper is at best part of what explains why we have the A-theoretical intuitions we do. This relates to Lee's final worry, that that story seems unable to fully explain the sense we have of the present as dynamically changing. I actually agree with him that there will also have to be a part of the explanation that appeals to mental representations that do make a past/future distinction (see, e.g., my 2014). I think there are a number of different ingredients in what we might call our naïve theory time, as is also evidenced by the fact that the A-theory comes in a number of different guises. The ingredient that, following Balashov (2005), I call Occurrence in the paper is only one of them.

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