

# Comments on Christoph Hoerl's "Experience and Time: Transparency and Presence"

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Visual spatial awareness is perspectival, in the sense that the way the spatial properties we experience appear to us seems to depend on where we see them from. For example, when you see a chair, it seems to you that if you had a different point of view, you would have a different experience of the chair's shape. Hoerl argues that there is no temporal analogue of a spatial viewpoint in perceptual experience, and thus experience is not *temporally viewpointed* as it is spatially viewpointed:

The sense in which perceptual experience lacks temporal viewpointedness, thus, is that there is no equivalent 'temporal point of view' that we could discriminate, from within experience, from the time of the experienced events, and thus no equivalent 'way' in which events figure in perception temporally that would also allow for other, alternative, ways in which the same events might figure in it.  
(2018, 142-3)

For Hoerl, this means that experience does not present events under any "temporal mode of presentation" and that is *untensed*: we do not experience events as being temporally present (or past, or future) (129). For experience to be tensed, it would have to involve awareness of the temporal location of the experience itself and its temporal relationship to the events one experiences (Kriegel 2007 defends the view that

perceptual experience is tensed in this sense). And this is precisely what Hoerl denies in claiming that experience is not temporally viewpointed.

Hoerl's claim is "purely *negative*," in that it is merely the denial that temporal perceptual awareness shares a phenomenological feature of spatial awareness (143). But he thinks that recognizing this purely negative feature can help us to answer some deep and enduring questions about the nature of perception, the nature of temporal experience, and the nature of time itself. This is an exciting proposal, and although I will raise doubts about some of Hoerl's central claims, thinking through his argument sheds new light on these questions and helps us understand what it would take to answer them. In this commentary, I will focus on two aspects of Hoerl's proposal: his claim that the lack of a temporal viewpoint explains the sense in which the *transparency thesis* about perceptual experience applies to temporal features, and his claim that it explains the kind of phenomenological directness that is distinctive of perceptual awareness.

Hoerl thinks that recognizing the lack of a temporal viewpoint in perceptual experience explains how the *transparency thesis* about experience applies to the case of temporal features. The general version of the transparency thesis says (in its stronger, *negative* form) that when we try to introspectively attend to our perceptual experiences, all that we manage to attend to are the objects that we seem to experience and their properties; we do not succeed in attending to the experience itself or its properties. There is considerable debate among philosophers about whether and how the transparency thesis should be applied to the case of temporal features. Certain authors argue that the transparency thesis needs to be applied to temporal features in a special way, in which we allow that we *can* be aware of the temporal features of our experiences, although those features seem indistinct from (or to 'match' with or

‘mirror’) the temporal features of the events we experience (see Phillips 2009, 2014; Soteriou 2013). Hoerl rejects this idea because, as he puts it, “there seems to be no scope within a description of our experience of temporal properties for a distinction between those experienced properties themselves and a point in time *from which* they are experienced” (143). He argues that once we recognize the lack of a temporal viewpoint in perceptual experience, we can see that the transparency thesis applies to the case of temporal features “in its strongest form”: we have no apparent introspective access to the temporal features of our experiences themselves (145) (in this, he seems to agree with Tye 2003, whose views on time and transparency he discusses on 131-2).

I think that the philosophers Hoerl is addressing could endorse some of his phenomenological claims while rejecting the strong version of temporal transparency. They might, for instance, accept his claim that the temporal features we experience in perception don’t appear to us in a variable manner, which seems to depend on our temporal perspective on them. Thus, they might agree with him when he says that there is no “‘way’ in which events figure in perception temporally that would also allow for other, alternative, ways in which the same events might figure in it” (142-3). They could therefore accept that temporal perception is not viewpointed *in the same way* that visual spatial perception is. But these philosophers might resist the transition from this claim to the claim that temporal perception lacks any “positive structural features,” and that introspecting perceptual experience never seems to reveal our own temporal perspective (147). On the view I’m suggesting, there would be no possible ‘perspectival’ variation in the way temporal features appear to us because what seems to be within our temporal perspective is simply whatever is concurrent with our experience. We do not have an extended temporal field of awareness, analogous to our spatially extended visual field. Nonetheless, we have a temporal perspective in perception, and events

appear to us in a way that seems to depend their falling within that perspective.

According to this suggestion, the temporal location of our perspective in perceptual experience is conceptually distinct from the apparent temporal location of what we perceive, but nonetheless these two temporal locations always seem to match.

It might seem difficult to make sense of experience having this kind of structure. Here, an analogy with non-visual sense modalities might help. Imagine a sense like touch, where one's awareness of spatial features of the environment depended on their making contact (and thus sharing a location with) with one's skin, but where one could make contact with external things only at a spatial point. Suppose that one could conceptually distinguish the location of one's point-like sensory receptor from the location of what one touches, even if the two locations were always the same.<sup>1</sup> This, I take it, is analogous to how Hoerl's targets might think about the structure of temporal awareness in perception. We have a moving temporal perspective on the world, but that perspective does not involve a temporally extended field of awareness, which would allow for the events we perceive to be experienced differently by rearranging them within the field.

The upshot of this line of thought is that the structural disanalogies between visual spatial perception and temporal perception that Hoerl notes are consistent with two quite different views about the way that temporal perceptual awareness is structured. Hoerl's view is that temporal perception has no positive temporal structural

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<sup>1</sup> This analogy draws inspiration from some of Martin's (1992) ideas about the relationship between touch and bodily awareness. Philosophers like Phillips and Soteriou will likely reject certain features of the analogy, because they do not think that we can *directly* attend to the temporal features of our experiences in the same way that we can seemingly directly attend to the locations of our body parts. But the point of the analogy is supposed to be simply that we can make sense of the idea of being aware of having a perspective on some experienced objects without having an extended field of awareness.

features, but another possibility is that its positive temporal structural features exist but are quite different its spatial structural features. I worry that we have arrived at a phenomenological stalemate. When philosophers debate the transparency thesis with respect to non-temporal features, they often try to produce examples of features we're aware of in perception but which seem not to be features of any experienced object (e.g., the blur in cases of blurry vision, which Hoerl mentions in footnote 6). The trouble here is that this strategy seems to be unavailable in the present debate, since the rival views we're considering agree about all of the temporal features that we experience; what they disagree about is whether those features seem to be features of the experienced events only or they seem to also be features of the experience itself.<sup>2</sup> This is a subtle phenomenological disagreement, and I'm not sure how one could make progress without simply asserting that the other side is failing to honestly and accurately describe their experience.

Does this stalemate matter? Hoerl suggests that his claim that perceptual experience is not temporally viewpointed is what Phillips and Soteriou are "actually trying to get at" in their discussions of temporal transparency, and this can make it sound as if his view is merely a friendly refinement of their views without major consequences for their projects (130). But the difference between the versions of temporal transparency endorsed by Phillips and Soteriou and that endorsed by Hoerl is significant. For both Phillips and Soteriou, their ideas about temporal transparency play key roles in arguments about the metaphysical nature of experience, and these roles could not be played by Hoerl's stronger version of temporal transparency. For Phillips, it is an argument for the *matching thesis* about the temporal structure of experience. This

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<sup>2</sup> I owe this point to Aaron Henry.

is the idea that the temporal properties we seem to experience events as having are always matched by the temporal properties of the experience itself (Phillips 2009, 2014). For Soteriou, it is an argument against the view that perceptual experience can be understood merely as a series of representational states, and for the view that perceptual experience is fundamentally *relational* (2013). I won't rehearse the details of the arguments here, but the point I want to emphasize is that the weaker versions of transparency, which allow for some awareness of temporal features of experience itself, are essential to these arguments. Roughly put, this is because both arguments attempt to use phenomenological claims about the way that experienced events are apparently temporally related to our experiences of them to draw conclusions about the metaphysical nature of experience. Such inferences wouldn't be possible if the phenomenology were simply silent on how the experienced events and the experiences themselves were temporally related.

One might draw a methodological lesson from this discussion. Authors like Phillips, Soteriou and Dainton (2000) have attempted to address questions of this sort using first-person phenomenological reflection. But given Hoerl's attractive, alternative description of the phenomenology, and the difficulty of deciding which description is correct, it might seem that these methods are insufficient. Perhaps addressing these questions requires bringing other sorts of evidence to bear on them—e.g., experimental evidence from illusions, or from the way that psychologists model temporal perception (as authors like Grush 2007, Watzl 2013 and Lee 2014 have done).

I will conclude by briefly commenting on the another aspect of Hoerl's proposal—its potential to explain the kind of felt directness which distinctively characterizes perceptual experience. He writes:

Temporally speaking, there is a sense in which things are not given to us under any 'mode of presentation' at all in sensory perception. In fact, it is just this, I want to suggest, which explains the special, *sui generis*, phenomenological character of perceptual experience, that is, the particularly direct way in which temporally present events figure in sensory awareness that the notion of experiential presence tries to capture. (145)

Hoerl's idea here seems to be that the lack of a temporal mode of presentation for temporal features amounts to a lack of *mediation* in temporal perception, and thus accounts for perception's characteristic sense of directness. He calls this distinctive feeling of directness *experiential presence* (I take this to be the feature of perceptual experience presenting its objects as *really being there*, or presenting experienced events as *really occurring*). Assuming that Hoerl's claims about perceptual phenomenology are correct, it's not clear to me that the purely negative structural feature he has identified (namely, the lack of temporal modes of presentation for perceptually experienced events) can explain the feeling of experiential presence in perception. This is because it seems to me that non-perceptual mental states could (and perhaps actually do) share this negative structural feature while lacking the feeling of experiential presence that is distinctive of perceptual experience.

For example, perceptual imagination lacks the feeling of experiential presence, since imagined objects don't really seem to be *there*, and imagined events don't really seem to be occurring. However, it also seems to lack the kinds of temporal modes of presentation that Hoerl has in mind. On my understanding of Hoerl's view, for an experienced event to have a temporal mode of presentation is for it to appear in a way which seems to depend on one's temporal relationship to it, and temporal modes of presentation correspond to the different ways that an event can be temporally related to

one's experience of it. So one experiences an event as falling under the temporal mode of presentation of *being present* insofar as one experiences it as occurring simultaneously with one's experience of it, or *being past* or *being future* insofar as one experiences it as occurring earlier or later than one's experience. Imagined events need not appear as present, past or future. For example, you can visually imagine an explosion of fireworks without imagining it as temporally related to your imagining of it in any way—the question 'When does the explosion seem to be occurring in relation to your imagining of it?' could have no answer.<sup>3</sup> Visually imagining fireworks and seeing fireworks are of course different in many ways, but with respect to the negative structural feature Hoerl has identified, they seem to be alike.

What this seems to show is that the merely negative feature of a mental occurrence *not* presenting its objects as related its own temporal location doesn't distinguish perceptual experience from all other mental occurrences. This feature seems to be shared by certain acts of imagination, as I have argued, and possibly by other mental occurrences too (consider, for example, the possibility of 'tenseless' thought, where one reflects on something without representing its temporal relationship to one's current temporal location). If this is correct, then it seems that this merely negative feature is insufficient to explain the feeling of experiential presence in perceptual

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<sup>3</sup> Despite this, perceptual imagination does not seem to be temporally transparent in the way that perceptual experience does. This is because we can distinguish the temporal features of what we imagine from those of the episode of imagining itself (Soteriou 2013, 90 makes a similar point). It's not the case that when one introspects an episode of perceptually imagining, one succeeds only in attending to the apparent temporal features of what is imagined, and fails to attend to any apparent temporal features of the mental act of imagining. As I have argued, an imagined event need have no apparent temporal location. But it seems that one can nonetheless be introspectively aware of the temporal location of one's act of imagining it. This seems to show that the question of whether events appear to us under a temporal mode of presentation does not by itself settle the question of temporal transparency, and that the absence of a temporal viewpoint and temporal transparency are not quite the same thing.



experience. The lack of a temporal viewpoint might be an important element in such an explanation, but a full explanation seems to require something else. Perhaps these other mental occurrences are mediated in *other* ways, and a full explanation of experiential presence simply requires us to elucidate all of the ways in which perception is unmediated. Another possibility is that explaining experiential presence requires not only a negative characterization of perceptual experience—i.e., a description of all of the kinds of mediation it lacks—but also some positive characterization of what distinguishes it from other mental occurrences: for example, a characterization of its distinctive role in guiding action.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The proposal that experiential presence and temporal presence are connected to the action-guiding role of perception is inspired by Chapter 13 of Matthen (2005) and by some of Grush's (2016) remarks. I am currently developing this view in my own work.

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