

Commentary on Hoerl – “Transparency and Presence”

Christoph aims to explain three phenomena of temporal experience using one tool – the idea that experience *lacks a temporal viewpoint*. The target explananda are:

- (1) The apparent connection between conscious perceptual awareness of events (their “presence” in experience), and awareness of them as happening in the present (their “presence” in a different sense). Whenever we consciously perceive events, in some sense we perceive them as happening in the present.
- (2) An idea found in Phillips and Soteriou, that in some sense temporal properties of experience can be introspected in experience, but in a way that is nonetheless compatible with the “transparency” of experience to introspection.
- (3) An idea held by some proponents of Presentism and related metaphysical views, that events appear in experience, or experience itself appears, as “Simply occurring” or “NOW” in some loaded metaphysical sense.

To be specific, (2) and (3) are supposed to be different ways of developing the connection pointed to by (1), so Christoph concentrates on them.

There is some suggestion at the beginning of the paper that conscious perception *necessarily* presents events as happening in the present. But surely, although our perceptual system does not present us with perceptual latencies (either deriving from latencies in transmission of information from source to sense organs, or latencies in perceptual processing itself), it’s not difficult to conceive of systems that they do make more explicit use of this information. Note that our perceptual systems do make compensations for differing latencies in computations of temporal relationships between events, but this latency information isn’t consciously available to us. Surely it’s just a contingent feature of us that this information isn’t salient enough to be worth keeping in an explicit form, so we just bundle everything in perception as “happening in the present” (I do not mean to suggest here that we don’t perceive temporal relationships between events, such duration and order information for sounds – the point is that the only *tensed* information is (at most) a crude stamping of events as “in the present”).

Phillips and Soteriou on Transparency

Phillips and Soteriou point out that, unlike other objective features of experience (e.g. the spatial features of neural firings that realize it in the brain), we are aware of temporal features of experience – e.g. how it is changing over time. But this is somewhat mysterious given the “transparency” of experience: the idea that attending to experience’s features inevitably only leads us to attend to the features of the environment is presented as having by experience. Transparency suggests that we can only attend to temporal features of external events, not temporal features of experience itself.

My understanding of their position is that the tension is resolved by supposing that we introspect temporal features of experience *by* attending to the apparent temporal features of external events. At least for Phillips, experience’s temporal structure in some way mirrors the apparent temporal structure of external events, and so this externally-directed temporal attention is a reliable way to get at experiential temporal structure.

If that is the right reading, then I think they are best understood as accepting what Christoph calls “weak transparency” but denying what he calls “strong transparency” – the claim that features of experience, other than its being an experience of certain environmental features, cannot be introspected at all (the “transparency” view that Tye defends). This isn’t exactly Christoph’s interpretation however. He thinks they are best understood as accepting both weak and strong transparency, and that their position can be elucidated in terms of the idea that experience *lacks a temporal viewpoint* – the diagnostic tool that will help with the other explananda too.

There is an alleged contrast here with the spatial viewpointness of experience. The notion of a spatial viewpoint is a little unclear to me, but it at least involves the presentation in experience of spatial relations between the subject of experience, and external events, not just the relations between the external events. In addition, these relations are given in a special “way”: just talking about which objective relations are represented is not sufficient to capture the notion of a “spatial viewpoint”. Probably part of the intuitive thought is that the subject is at the “origin” of the spatial viewpoint, and this idea of “origin” is not captured just by specifying the represented spatial relations.

By contrast, temporal experience, according to Christoph, doesn’t distinguish the temporal location of the subject’s experiences from the temporal location of the events experienced. It just presents the temporal relations between perceived events, and is silent about the timing of experience. In that sense, events seem to be “simply occurring”. This, allegedly, is what P and S have in mind when they discuss transparency for temporal experience.

A puzzle for me about Christoph’s diagnosis of Phillips and Soteriou, is that this lack of temporal viewpoint, if anything, seems to support Tye’s view, that we are only ever aware of temporal features of external events in experience, *not* temporal features of experience itself. Phillips and Soteriou think instead that we can read the temporal features of experience off of the apparent temporal features of the environment. What about the notion of a temporal viewpoint (or lack thereof) helps us make sense of that part of their view? Also, in what sense does “no temporal viewpoint” enable us to read them as holding onto both strong and weak transparency, as Christoph suggests?

Also, I’m puzzled by the claim that P and S’s view is in some sense a development of (1) – the correlation between two types of “presence”. The kind of temporal judgments they are talking about are not tensed ones, so in what sense is their view a way of developing a claim about present tense in experience? (this relates to another puzzle – by the end, Christoph is denying that there is tense in experience – but then phenomenon (1) simply *doesn’t exist*, and so (2) and (3) can’t be ways of elucidating it).

Simple Occurrence, Temporal Metaphysics, and Temporal Viewpointness

Christoph also thinks lack of temporal perspective can help us understand certain presentists’ phenomenological claims. In particular, he discusses Balashov’s claim that experiences seem to “occur” in some special sense, which allegedly is part of the experiential ground for belief in time passing in a strong sense – e.g. that present events have a special property of “nowness”, or that only present events exist. Christoph’s idea

is that it is really the lack of temporal perspective that Balashov and others are picking up on here.

He elucidates this again by looking at the contrast with spatial perception. In spatial perception, we are aware that perceiving events depends on getting the right spatial relationship with them. By contrast, since we are not aware of temporal relationships between ourselves / our experiences and external events, they seem to “just happen” – not happen partly because we are well temporally positioned with respect to them. This is why tense seems more objective than spatial indexing (e.g. happening “here”).

Here’s a few worries about this story. First, is it really true that there is no temporal analogue for our grasp of the spatial enabling conditions of experience? Aren’t the enabling conditions for perceiving an event that you have to be correctly positioned with respect to the event, with sense organs ready, *at the time of the event*? And isn’t our grasp of this reflected in say, cases, where we know an event is about to happen in a certain locale, and we wait around until it happens in order to see it? It doesn’t “just happen”, but rather we see it happen because we are well placed both temporally and spatially.

Second, there are many aspects of what enables perception of an event, other than it’s occurrence at the same time as (or just before) we experience it. Some of these conditions – such as being correctly spatially positioned with respect to the event – are represented in experience itself, and so, for those conditions, there is a sense in which experience “gives us the materials” to explain why we are able to perceive what we do. But surely there is much that enables experiences that is not represented in experience, and which we don’t have much explicit grasp of. We are not typically tempted on this basis to infer bizarre metaphysical explanations for the absence of perception when these conditions fail, so why do some people do that on the basis of events being past and future (and therefore not currently perceived)? In earlier comments I gave the example of the fact that we can’t see the insides of objects, but don’t really know why this is, unless educated. We don’t infer that they have some occult metaphysical property because of this. I don’t think that visual experiences give us the materials to explain why occlusion happens, but Christoph disagrees. But even if that’s not a relevant case, surely there are others – perception doesn’t explain to us everything about what enables perception to work. What about the fact that we can’t see objects or features that are too small to see? Why don’t we infer that they don’t exist, or that large objects have some special objective property that makes them visible? (“largeness-presence”!!). Or what if someone interferes with processing in a visual area using TMS to produce visual distortions. We might have no idea why this is disabling experience, but not grasp for occult explanations. Surely there are at least some examples like this.

Third, A-theorists don’t *merely* claim that present events are all that there is, that they “just are happening” in a way that other events aren’t. They think that they experientially intuit the present moment constantly moving along, highlighting different events with “nowness”. Christoph’s view is that tense isn’t involved in perceptual experience *at all*, and that we just perceive the B-theoretical temporal relations between events. But it’s quite surprising to think that the impression that “nowness” exists in this very strong, dynamically changing sense, could be explained by a complete absence of anything tensed in experience. Surely, this sense of events coming in from the future, entering the

experiential window of the present, and then disappearing into the past, requires that in some sense we appeal to mental representations that make a past/present/future distinction in some way. Maybe those mental representations aren't exclusively perceptual experiences, and so maybe there's a way of making this compatible with his view – but I definitely would like to hear more here.

Two further issues

A couple of final loose ends. Experience having a spatial viewpoint in Christoph's sense is supposed to be in tension with intentionalism: the view that the phenomenology of experience is fully determined by the apparent features of the presented scene. Indeed, Christoph says that spatially viewpointed experience is a counterexample to the kind of Transparency thesis that theorists like Tye use to defend intentionalism. But I don't see why his applications of the idea requires this controversial posture. What seems to matter is that certain temporal relations (between the subject's experience and other events) are *not* represented in temporal experience – and that's something that an intentionalist could appeal to also. So what role is the more controversial aspect of a "point of view" playing in the paper?

Second, how strongly committed is Christoph to a lack of tense in perceptual experience? Surely there is at least a thin sense in which perceived events are presented as happening in the present: perceptual states function to inform us about the present environment, and accordingly they cause judgments, behaviors and other post-perceptual responses that only make sense if the information in perception pertains to the present. So surely there is at least a fairly thin sense in which perception is "about the present" (and as I mentioned earlier, we can easily imagine it *not* having this feature necessarily, were latency information retained and used). I'm not actually sure what it would even *mean* for it to represent the present in some thicker sense – so I'm not sure what exactly it is that is being denied. What is at stake in the debate about whether experience has tensed content?