

On Time Seeming to Pass

“We say that time passes or flows by. We speak of the course of time. ...If time is similar to a river, it flows from the past towards the present and the future. ...But this often repeated metaphor is in reality extremely confused. ...The fact that the metaphor based on this comparison has persisted from the time of Heraclitus to our own day is explained by our surreptitiously putting into the river a witness of its course” (Merleau-Ponty, 1962: 366).

In discussions of the philosophy of time, theorists often appeal to an ingredient of our wakeful, phenomenally conscious experience as evidence of a certain metaphysical view of time: that time flows or passes.¹ This kind of metaphysical claim is itself difficult to offer without resorting to metaphors of streams, flowing water, or other forms of movement. Without resorting to metaphors – and whether or not it is true that time does in fact pass – it is worth pausing to consider what this apparent ingredient of a subject’s phenomenally conscious experience amounts to. The issue of interest in what follows is not whether time *does* pass, but the sense in which time *seems* to pass; and in virtue of what?

Within academic discussions and literature written for a more general audience, it is traditionally claimed that there is such an ingredient of a subject’s experience. Schuster says that “the flow of time, or passage, as it is known, *is given in experience*, ...it is as indubitable an aspect of our perception of the world as the sights and sounds that come in upon us...” (Schuster, 1986: 695; *emphasis added*). Davies similarly says that “as a human being, I find it impossible to relinquish the sensation of a flowing time and a moving present moment. It is something so basic to my experience of the world...” (Davies, 1995: 275). However, in contemporary debates the supposed experience of time passing has become a contested issue. Some theorists have claimed that time does seem to pass, suggesting various candidate explanations of what the experience of time passing amounts to;²

¹ Craig (2000) presents such an argument from experience, when he says that experience is “a defeater-defeater that overwhelms any B-theoretic arguments against the reality of tense” (Craig, 2000: 138). See also the discussions in Balashov (2005), Falk (2003), and Norton (2010).

² There are a number of proposals which could be appealed to, but which I do not have the space to consider here. Torrenco (2017) presents a phenomenal modifier (or what might be called a projectivist) account of the experience of passage. While I am sympathetic to much of the motivation behind Torrenco’s account, I take the proposal I offer in §3 to be an independently motivated alternative. Phillips (2013) gives an account of the phenomenology of time passing in terms of the direct perception of durations relative to a non-perceptual stream of consciousness. Insofar as Phillips’ account is of the *rate* at which time seems to pass, much of what I say may be compatible with his proposal. Skow (2011 and 2012) offers a view on which time seems to pass because, in part, time *does* pass. Though the author later appears to change his mind on this matter (Skow 2015).

others have insisted that these theorists are misclassifying aspects of their experience,³ taking what is really the experience of something else to be the experience of time passing.

To give substance to this disagreement, in §1 I generate a puzzle about how time could seem to pass in perceptual experience. I briefly canvas three proposals from the literature which can be read as attempts to solve this puzzle. A reductive proposal which appeals to the perception of motion/change is presented in §2.1; a proposal which appeals to the objects of perception being presented as enduring is presented in §2.2; and an appeal to episodic memory (in addition to the deliverances of perceptual experience) is presented in §2.3. In §3 I offer a proposal which allows us to bypass the puzzle without abandoning the idea that time seems to pass. On the positive proposal I develop, an appeal to ‘a witness’ is made less surreptitiously than Merleau-Ponty suggests it often is. I suggest that the tripartite temporal structure of an experiencing subject’s perspective – something to be motivated and elucidated in §3.2, through reflection upon a subject’s experiential awareness of the actions she is engaged in – is responsible for time seeming to pass.

1. Time seeming to pass: two assumptions and a puzzle

A puzzle regarding the supposed experience of time passing can be generated when we try to reconcile two independently plausible phenomenological claims. Firstly, from passages such as those quoted previously, we can take it that time seeming to pass is supposed to be a pervasive, perhaps ever-present, ingredient of our wakeful phenomenally conscious lives. Secondly, there is the claim that *perceptual* experience is temporally transparent.⁴ In my hands, the scope of the temporal transparency claim is limited to the following negative claim: it doesn’t seem to the subject as though, through merely reflecting upon her perceptual phenomenology, she can mark out the temporal location of her perceptual point of view on an object or occurrence as distinct from the apparent temporal location of whatever object or occurrence it is that she seems to be perceptually aware of.

³ Such arguments appear to be presented by Callender (2008), Deng (2013a, 2013b, and 2017), Frischhut (2015), and Hoerl (2014). The latter is more narrowly focused on arguing that we do not seem to *perceive* time passing. These authors appear to be motivated, at least in part, to argue against the idea that experience supports the metaphysical view of time actually passing. It should be noted that in §3 I offer an account of the phenomenology, the correct account of the metaphysics of reality is then a further question which I do not take the phenomenology to settle.

⁴ For variations on the claim that perceptual experience is temporally transparent, see Frischhut (2014), Phillips (2014a and 2014b), Rashbrook (2013a), Richardson (2014), and Soteriou (2013). See Hoerl (2018) for critical discussion of temporal transparency.

To generate the puzzle, let us take from Schuster (quoted previously) the claim that when we talk about the experience of time passing we are talking about *perceptual* experience. Consider a subject perceiving some occurrence, such as visually perceiving a ball rolling down an incline. What is it that she is perceptually aware of which can be properly brought out as time seeming to pass? One thought may be that the subject seems to be perceptually aware, at a given time, of the ball's journey from one location to another over a greater interval of time. Being so aware of the ball's journey, the subject might also be said to be aware of not only the ball's change in spatial (and temporal) location, but a change in some property of *time*, of some previous time seeming to give way to the time which seems to be *now*. However, commitment to temporal transparency renders such an explanation unavailable. Supposing that a subject is able to discern the time at which she seems to be perceptually presented with such an occurrence,⁵ by temporal transparency she is unable – in introspection alone – to distinguish between the time at which she is so perceptually presented with the occurrence and a distinct apparent temporal location of the occurrence perceptually presented. From merely reflecting on the phenomenology, she does not seem to be perceptually aware of the ball in a given location as *just previous* or *past*.

It is not yet clear what it means for time to *seem* to change, pass, or flow, unless we are merely saying that each time can be said to seem to be present at the time at which it is presented in experience. But the claim that time seems to pass is certainly supposed to amount to more than the claim that at each time of experience it seems to be the time that it is. For there to be a change there needs to be something which is the subject of that change; it is as of yet unclear how time can seem to be the subject of such change.⁶ I take the proposal I offer in §3 to directly address this issue. Prior to offering a positive account it will be useful to consider some existing proposals, in order to draw attention to why puzzles remain on such proposals.

⁵ In what follows reference to the time presented in experience, or to what is experienced as *at a time*, is not to pick out an instant, it is to pick out time as it is given in perceptual experience – the time a subject's perceptual point of view is transparent to. We might think that this is the interval of the specious present.

⁶ This being one of the issues widely discussed in the philosophy of time since McTaggart's (1908) argument for the unreality of time, an argument defended by Dummett (1960).

2. Accounts of why time seems to pass

2.1. From the perception of motion and change

In some sections of the literature an appeal to perceived change is tied to an awareness that time is passing.⁷ It is true that there is a distinctive phenomenal character to a subject's experience in cases of perceived motion/change, over and above the experience of some object having a given property at a time and the experience of the same object not having that given property at a later time. This is demonstrated by a simple contrast case. Take the typical example in the literature: when one looks at the second-hand of a clock, one sees it moving around the clock face (assuming the hand sweeps around the clock face, rather than ticking); when one looks at the hour-hand of a clock one does not see it moving, even if after some time one can infer that it has moved. This illustrates the distinction between perceptible and imperceptible motion.

On one suggestion, it is said that the (visual) perceptual systems are such that the perceptual experience of change involves a dynamic quality, and this quality is what is picked out by people who refer to time as seeming to pass. Granting that there is some particular ingredient of the subject's phenomenology which we can call time seeming to pass, the suggestion is that this ingredient is reducible to some combination of other phenomenal ingredients, such as the perception of motion and change. This appears unsatisfactory.

It is not necessary to perceive motion or qualitative change in order for time to seem to pass. This point is emphasised by Torrenco (2017). Torrenco picks up on the distinction between perceptible and imperceptible change and says: "Although there is no direct perception of movement or change ... [in the case of watching the hour-hand of a clock, for example, unlike the case of watching the second-hand] ... they don't seem to differ with respect to their ability to tell us what it is like for time to pass" (Torrenco, 2017: 176). Even when we are confronted with a seemingly static state of affairs in perceptual experience, there is said to be a phenomenal ingredient in our

⁷ See, for example, Paul's appeal to a subject's perceptual mechanisms and the empirical explanation offered of the (visual) perceptual experience of motion and qualitative change, where this is tied to time seeming to pass (Paul 2010, esp. pp.351-55). Paul also says that "[m]aking sense of the features of temporal experience is fundamental to our ability to make sense of the world and of ourselves as agents in the world and bears important connections to one's having a point of view and to one's sense of being a self" (*ibid.*: 334). The latter claim might be close to the truth of the matter, but I believe it gets obscured in Paul's positive proposal and the appeal to the visual experience of motion/change.

wakeful conscious lives which can be picked out as time seeming to pass as the subject's experiencing continues on.⁸

To put the problem concisely: Over a given period of time a subject might not be perceptually presented with any discriminable qualitative contrasts between property instances, and yet it would not seem to the subject as though time were standing still. Time seems to pass as she seems to be experiencing the same (seemingly unchanging) objects for some period of time. This strikes a chord with the first assumption outlined above, that time's seeming passage is supposed to be a persistent and perhaps ever-present feature of our wakefully conscious lives.

It is open to a theorist to dispute such a claim and to insist that experiencing time passing *does* entail perceiving motion and change,⁹ but if the claims of Torrenco (and O'Shaughnessy) – in addition to the assumption made at the outset – are more in line with lay thought regarding time seeming to pass, any such response would be at least revisionary. For those who find the opening assumption plausible, the phenomenal ingredient being gestured at as the experience of time's apparent passing is not reducible to *perceived* qualitative motion/change.

2.2. From the experience of change and persistence

One moral we may take from the preceding discussion is that it is not merely the experience of motion/change which is distinctly temporal, but also the experience of persistence regardless of change. We can be perceptually aware of some object persisting without undergoing some qualitative change as something which occurs over time. Whether the subject seems to have been perceiving a static state of affairs or a changing one, she will seem to have been experiencing it for some time as her experiencing continues on; being so perceptually aware of some object persisting over time (whether it undergoes some qualitative change or not), time seems to pass.

⁸ Also see O'Shaughnessy, who says that: "Even in the situation of total lack of change in the objects of perception, change continues—within. ...However frozen the perceptible world may in fact be, the 'internal clock' of consciousness ticks on..." (O'Shaughnessy, 2000: 61). In claiming that the internal clock of consciousness ticks on, O'Shaughnessy claims that time would still seem to pass, for the subject. This is related to his claim that "experience guarantees a direct confrontation with the passage of time..." (O'Shaughnessy, 2000: 65).

⁹ One suggestion may be that we should instead develop such a proposal in terms of some other form of awareness of change, which could include an awareness that more experiencing is taking place even if there was no perceptible change in the environment. This thought gets close to the proposal I offer in §3.

The above line of thought may make plausible the following suggestion: it is something about how perceptually presented objects seem to persist over time which accounts for the sense in which time seems to pass. This line of thought is presented by Simon Prosser (2012 and 2016), who argues that it is in virtue of the objects of perceptual experience being presented as enduring that we experience time passing. To endure, in the sense at issue, is – crudely – for something to exist in its entirety at any moment at which it exists. The alternative way to persist over time is by perduring; to perdure is for something – again crudely – to persist by having different temporal parts at different times.¹⁰ Prosser says that “in order to experience change our experience must also represent something retaining its identity through the change. This, I suggest, requires objects to be represented as enduring” (Prosser, 2012: 105). In order for an object to be presented as changing in colour from green to red, for example, it must be presented as one and the same object which is at one time green and then at a later time red. We can say the same of persistence regardless of qualitative change.

On perdurance theories an object also retains its identity throughout a change, but Prosser says such theories do not capture the change “*as we experience it*” (Prosser, 2012: 106; *emphasis in original*). He says that if we were to experience objects as perduring, we would experience one temporal part followed by another, experiencing these *as* temporal parts, and that reflection supports the claim that the phenomenology is not this way. The consequence of this line of reasoning, Prosser suggests, is that objects are presented in experience as enduring.

According to Prosser, objects being presented as enduring is responsible for change seeming dynamic, and change being experienced as dynamic is a key part of time seeming to pass (in this sense, Prosser comes close to the position explored in §2.1). The particular proposal I wish to draw from Prosser is as follows: the perceptual experience of objects persisting over time by enduring is what the experience of time passing consists in.¹¹ Yet the perceptual experience of objects as enduring is not necessary for time to seem to pass.

Consider the following cases. A subject feels a strong breeze across her face as she steps outdoors, and, to switch sensory modalities, she hears the whistling of the wind. In either case – and even if

¹⁰ This comes from Lewis’s (1986) discussion of temporary intrinsics and relates to contested issues concerning how we are to understand the endurance/perdurance distinction (see, for example, Donnelly, 2011; Fine, 2008; Hofweber and Velleman, 2011; Sider, 2001). I don’t intend to settle any such disputes here.

¹¹ If there are other proposals which can be read in Prosser’s discussion then these would need to be developed further. In conversation, Prosser has confirmed that he foresees more of a role being given to the subject’s sense that she too endures; the pursuit of this thought is one way of viewing the proposal I offer in §3.

we were to suppose that she is not perceiving in any other modality for a time – time seems to be passing as her experience continues on. In each case, there is constantly something new occurring and being experienced. Even if there is no change in the content of what is being experienced – such as when one hears the whistling of the wind without hearing it getting louder/quieter, faster/slower, and so on – there is still *more experiencing* occurring. In neither case have we introduced an object – a spatial particular – that the subject is experientially aware of as enduring; yet in experiencing either it is plausible to maintain that time seems to pass.

Our perceptual experience of occurrences involves a seeming awareness of time passing. On the proposal attributed to Prosser this would only be derivatively so, in virtue of it somewhere involving an experience of an object (on Prosser's proposal it is necessary to experience objects – as enduring – in order to experience time passing). This does not appear to be true to the phenomenology in the two cases above. It appears plausible that a subject can be perceptually aware of a strong breeze, or of the whistling of the wind, without thereby being perceptually aware of an enduring object of experience. Because in such cases time seems to pass, the perceptual experience of objects as enduring is not necessary for time to seem to pass; hence this proposal cannot give us the whole story.

2.3. Beyond perceptual experience

Our phenomenally conscious wakeful lives – our conscious points of view in time – do not merely reduce to the deliverances of perceptual experience. As wakefully conscious subjects we also recall and anticipate occurrences; it may be thought that it is a form of memory which is responsible for time seeming to pass. In some recent discussions of our experience of the apparent passage of time, some authors have explicitly distinguished between the temporal awareness afforded by perceptual experience and that which is afforded by recollection. For example, Le Poidevin says: “We are indirectly aware of the passage of time when we reflect on our memories, which present the world as it was, and so a contrast with how things are now” (Le Poidevin, 2007: 87). Following Le Poidevin, Deng (2017) also says that reflection upon what one recalls affords a kind of temporal awareness which might be thought to play a role in time seeming to pass. Deng, like Le Poidevin, calls this an indirect kind of temporal awareness “that arises when we reflect on how things used to be and compare them to how they are now” (Deng, 2017: 245). In so far as these are offered as

explanations of time seeming to pass for wakefully conscious subjects,¹² we need to say more about the form of memory that such explanations concern.

It cannot be that memory understood as retained knowledge (such as semantic memory) plays the role envisioned by such authors in an explanation of time seeming to pass. Retained knowledge may concern timeless facts, such as facts concerning prime numbers; such knowledge does not play any role in a distinctive form of temporal awareness. There is also no guarantee that retained knowledge regarding occurrences in time will concern times at which the subject was alive, or that such knowledge will make a difference to how things seem experientially to the subject. That Harold Godwinson died during the Battle of Hastings in 1066 may have been learned in childhood and retained through adolescence and into adulthood, but this retained knowledge does not appear to make an experiential difference to the subject, we say that such knowledge is retained even in dreamless sleep.

An appeal to episodic memory¹³ – understood as a form of auto-noetic, autobiographical memory, taken to involve some form of imagery¹⁴ – may appear plausible. The proposal would then be that it is the comparison between what one episodically recalls and what one is currently perceptually aware of which is responsible for time's seeming passage. Let's take episodic memory to be an experiential form of awareness of objects (and their qualities) as they *were* previously perceived, but not as they are *now* perceived (episodic recollection is not temporally transparent to its objects). The claim could be that, granting that in episodic recall a subject is aware of an event (or temporal part thereof) as something which was witnessed at the time at which it occurred, but which is now – during the time of recall – no longer being witnessed, this delivers a sense in which time seems to pass or have passed. In the current context, there is one particular problem with such a proposal (though there may also be other, subtler problems).

The proposal under consideration makes use of an appeal to episodic memory in order to give an account of an ingredient of the phenomenology which can be picked out as time seeming to pass.

¹² To be clear, this is not a claim the authors explicitly support. Deng goes on to argue that time does not *seem* to pass in any substantive phenomenological sense. Le Poidevin, in the previously quoted passage, also says that we are more immediately aware of the passage of time when we perceive motion and/or change; moreover it isn't obvious that time seeming to 'pass' is really what is at issue for Le Poidevin, rather than experiencing time and/or temporal phenomena more generally.

¹³ That there is such a distinction to be drawn between semantic and episodic memory is stressed by the work of Tulving (1972 and 1982).

¹⁴ By 'imagery' I here simply mean that there is something experiential, there is something it is like for the subject, where this need not be understood in visual terms.

Such an ingredient of the phenomenology would be a feature which is only present in episodic recall. Time seeming to pass is supposed to be a pervasive part of our experiential lives. It is a plausible enough assumption that episodic recall only occurs sporadically. Therefore to pick out a phenomenological feature of episodic recall is not to pick out the phenomenological ingredient of interest when theorists discuss time seeming to pass, something which is said to be persistently and immediately given to us.

Without appealing to more than what is presented in perceptual experience, we appear to encounter the puzzle laid out in §1. The temporal transparency of perceptual experience makes it puzzling how time can seem to pass. An appeal to episodic recollection does not provide us with a solution to our puzzle, but it would be an oversimplification to conclude that no appeal to a form of memory or anticipation could be fruitful in explaining a sense in which time seems to pass. I will explore a further possibility, drawing on a role for an experiencing subject's perspective in time, in the final section.

3. On why time seems to pass

3.1. Starting again

To make headway, let's return to some thoughts offered at the outset. Merleau-Ponty suggested that the metaphor of time as a river, and of it flowing/passing, is only supported by our *surreptitiously* assigning a role to a witness of its course. Motivated by Merleau-Ponty's claim, we can stop to ask if there is something about the role of a witness – the experiencing subject – which, once articulated, might allow for an account of time seeming to pass.

In offering an account of time seeming to pass, it is not enough to merely appeal to an experiential perspective, because occupying an experiential perspective on a given state of affairs is not sufficient for anything to *seem* to pass. Consider a subject's perspective in space. It would not be plausible to claim that space seems to pass the typical subject in the sense in which time is supposed to. As time seeming to pass is said to be one of the ways in which a subject's experience of time differs from her experience of space, we are motivated to look for ways in which the experiential perspective a subject occupies in space differs from that which she occupies in time.

One thought might be that it is the passivity in the change of perspective in the temporal case, unlike the activity in the change of perspective in the spatial case, which is sufficient for time to seem to pass. This thought goes as follows. The subject can (to an extent) be active with regards to the spatial location of her experiential perspective; she can choose to move through three-dimensional space in a number of ways and she can choose to remain stationary (relative to her immediate environment). The subject is not so active with regards to the temporal location of her experiential perspective; she cannot choose at will what time to experience next, and she cannot choose to remain at one particular temporal vantage point.

Passivity regarding the temporal location of one's point of view does contrast with the agentic control one has over its spatial location, but this difference between the two cases is not sufficient for time – rather than space – to seem to pass.¹⁵ To demonstrate why, we can imagine a spatial case in which one passively occupies a series of positions relative to an object. From cinematic representation we are familiar with a range of camera angles on an object being presented in succession, without the audience having any say on which camera angle is presented next. In a broadly analogous fashion, suppose a subject possesses subsequent perspectives, at disparate points (not following a continuous path through spacetime) in three-dimensional space, upon an object; suppose further that she has no agentic control over the succession of perspectives she occupies. (For current purposes the specifics of the example do not matter, whether we construe the example as involving virtual reality goggles, a subject being rapidly and continuously teletransported, or simply the watching of a film.) In the supposed case the subject occupies a series of seemingly random perspectives upon an object at subsequent times. The subject seems to change in her spatial location relative to the object, but it does not appear plausible to suggest that in this case space would seem to pass in the sense that time is supposed to. Therefore the appeal to passivity – regarding the location of one's point of view – does not alone appear to be sufficient for anything to seem to pass.

An alternative suggestion might appeal to the idea that there has to be a continuous (or at least not noticeably discontinuous) path through time/space in order for time/space to seem to pass. Without saying more, it would appear that, once again, this is not quite enough. We can take there to be a perspective on time/space which includes some sort of awareness of a 'path', without time/space seeming to pass. For example, in the spatial case there is no sense in which anything

¹⁵ I do not dispute that such passivity may be necessary, what I dispute is that passivity alone is sufficient. Minimally, it needs to be supplemented with other features of awareness; in particular, an awareness of more than the present time.

seems to pass if one remains stationary at a point on a path.¹⁶ The metaphor of a path only appears to be fruitful if it is added that one seems to be moving along the path.¹⁷ In order for time to seem to pass, it appears that there must be some sense of movement; a sense in which the subject is aware of occupying distinct, successive temporal locations at distinct times (being aware of them as successive).

3.2. The tripartite temporal structure of experience

In order to account for time seeming to pass, I will turn to consider the temporal structure of a subject's experiential perspective. This involves an appeal to how, in ongoing experience, we have a form of awareness of both the immediate past and immediate future, where such an awareness has an irreducible role to play in characterising a subject's awareness of the present.¹⁸ This is not to say that what is presented in perceptual experience is presented under distinct temporal modes of presentation, rather the awareness of immediately preceding and subsequent times is constitutive of the interval being given as present in experience.

To elucidate this tripartite temporal structure, before returning to the issue time seeming to pass, we can turn to O'Shaughnessy's discussion in his *Consciousness and the World* (2000). O'Shaughnessy says that the experiencing subject "stands in a special relation to time not discoverable in those not experiencing" (O'Shaughnessy, 2000: 50); at least part of this special relation is to be found in the way in which something about a 'thin now' is only accessible to an experiencing subject. By speaking of a 'thin now', O'Shaughnessy says that this use of 'now' should be thought of as picking out an instant, rather than a 'fat now' which picks out a rough position on a timescale. In using the fat now, we can truly say '2018 is now coming to an end' when speaking at around 11pm on December 31st, but in using the thin now we could only truly say this on the stroke of midnight. I will assume that we could also use this 'thin now' to pick out the interval of the specious present,

¹⁶ I take this to be the import of Kit Fine's discussion, when he says (regarding the temporal case): "the passage of time requires that the moments of time be *successively* present and this appears to require more than the presentness of a single moment of time" (Fine, 2005: 287; *emphasis added*).

¹⁷ Dummett (1960) supports this idea by imagining a hypothetical observer who is aware of four-dimensional spacetime in such a way that it can survey the whole course of events at once. In this case, he says: "If our hypothetical observer observes only the four-dimensional configuration without observing our movement – the movement of consciousness – through it, like someone observing the road but blind to the traveler, he does not see all that happens. But if he also observes our passage through it, what he is observing is no longer static..." (1960: 502).

¹⁸ As may be obvious, this has much in common with discussions of Husserlian phenomenology. Given Husserl's own change in mind on the topic across his works, and given the disagreements among commentators over how to construe Husserl's philosophical position at any one time, I don't propose to discuss his views herein.

rather than an instant.¹⁹ In recent work, building upon O’Shaughnessy’s discussion, Crowther and Soteriou (2017) characterise this special relation to the ‘thin now’ as “a temporally indexical mode of awareness of the present moment” (Crowther and Soteriou, 2017: 186). What experience affords a subject with is a form of awareness of a time, the time given in experience, as the time that it is. This time – the thin-now – *seems* to be the time the subject has a vantage point upon.

In addition to being aware of a given time that it is the time that it is, O’Shaughnessy says that an experiencing subject’s temporal awareness has a tripartite structure. O’Shaughnessy describes how this tripartite structure of experience “essentially connects and contrasts ‘now’ with its immediate neighbours...” (O’Shaughnessy, 2000: 55). In doing so, he says: “The essential description of any experience of the moment contains an irreducible reference to the immediate past/future of the experience, given from the temporal vantage-point of ‘now’...” (*ibid.*: 62). This can be read as the claim that experiencing subjects, in addition to being experientially aware of the time presented in experience, are psychologically oriented to what is to come and what has just been. This psychological orientation is asymmetrical, to the *immediate* past and *immediate* future,²⁰ either side of the time given in experience.

Appeal to an experiencing subject’s temporal awareness as *asymmetrical* is to appeal to an inequivalence in the subject’s awareness of what is to come and what has just been. This can be contrasted with a subject’s spatial awareness of what – from a given position – is just out of view to the left and to the right. With the subject’s psychological orientation towards the future, she has an awareness of there constantly being something new coming to be experienced (if not different in content, there is still *more experiencing* to come); the subject’s psychological orientation towards the past involves an awareness of what has been experienced and cannot be returned to (at least a token occurrence cannot be returned to, though there is a sense in which the same type of occurrence can be experienced again). By contrast, if a particular object passes out of the subject’s visual field – to her left or right – there is not typically an awareness on the subject’s behalf that it cannot be returned to and experienced again; rather, the subject is typically well aware of how to see the object again, through turning left or right.

¹⁹ As it will be used in what follows, the ‘thin now’ is ‘thin’ in that it only picks out the temporal extent which is given in experience, the time perceptual experience is transparent to.

²⁰ It might be the case that, in unfamiliar circumstances, what the subject anticipates is not a given stimulus being perceptually presented, but more minimally that *something* will be perceptually presented (where what this ‘something’ is might be more or less precisely specified).

While the notion of a primitive psychological awareness of the immediate past and future appears to be under-described by O’Shaughnessy, there are a few different ways in which the project can be illuminated. An independent source of motivation for appealing to such a tripartite structure of temporal awareness in wakeful experience – which O’Shaughnessy himself appeals to – can be found in how experiencing subjects engage in intentional action. When explaining a subject’s actions in terms of her intentions, we appeal to a distinctive relation to her immediate past and immediate future. O’Shaughnessy expresses this point by saying that there is “no action without intention, and no intention without a mental posture directed towards the future (not to be confused with the capacity to *think* about the future)” (*ibid.*: 53). The last parenthesis is important here for the current project. What is at issue is an awareness the *immediate* future, that portion of time into which one’s acting continues, rather than merely the distant future portion of time one can hypothesise about.²¹ For this to be of use in the current context, we need to show that this posture to the immediate past and future is not merely a feature of how we describe an agent’s actions, but of how she experiences the actions she is engaged in.

When a subject performs a given intentional action, such as running across her garden in order to chase away a fox, her intention at any moment in time aims towards the immediate future and depends upon the immediate past. There is a constant bringing about of some state of affairs, her running onwards to some further point of the garden, were at any moment she has an awareness of and orientation towards what she is intending to do (what she will do in her immediate future, such as continue running, or skid to a halt) and towards what she has just done (what she did in her immediate past); without which she would not have the same awareness of what it is she is doing *now*.

The way in which we have a perspective in time, revealed in how a subject experiences her own intentional activity, cannot be captured by simply talking about the temporal relations between the occurrences that the subject is experientially aware of. In intentional action, discharging an intention requires an awareness of what is the case *now*, at the time of discharge, and what one anticipates unfolding in the immediate future. An awareness of a time as *now* also allows for the

²¹ We can also find the connection between a psychological orientation to the future and action in Augustine’s *Confessions*, where he says: “...we often plan our future actions in advance, and that the advance planning itself exists in the present, whereas the action being planned does not yet exist, because it is in the future. Once we have got it under way, and have begun to put what we were planning into action, then that action will be existent—because it is at that point not in the future but existing in the present” (Augustine Book XI, 18; 2016: 227). While Augustine illustrates the connection between action and an orientation towards the future from the present, it should be stressed that the account being advanced in the current section does not require the explicit planning of future actions, in the sense in which Augustine appears to have in mind.

subject to be aware of particular activity as what is *now* being-performed and as that which she was aware of immediately previously as intended-to-be-performed.

In intentionally acting over some period of time a subject is, over that time, poised to act: to continue with the performance of an action and/or to change the course of her action.²² Being in this position of readiness/potentiality to act is expressible as an awareness that ‘I can φ ’, whether or not I want to φ or I try to φ . φ -ing will, in any such a case, be something I am aware that I can do in the immediate future, should I *now* form the intention to perform the action. This awareness – that ‘I can φ ’ – need not be too reflective.²³ Rather than a subject explicitly entertaining the thought that ‘I can φ ’, this should be taken as giving voice to something more primitive. When I awake in the morning, I am aware that I can swing my legs out of bed, that I can try to recall my dream, or try to imagine my meeting later that day, or simply lay still. I am aware that I can φ , whether or not I choose to, and without explicitly entertaining the thought that ‘I can φ ’. The cognitive form of awareness that ‘I can φ ’, such as entertaining this proposition in thought, is a higher and more sophisticated form of what is a distinctive property of the experience of agency.²⁴

In the typical case, a subject engaged in intentional action has expectations about what will occur in her own immediate future and an awareness of what was experienced as occurring in her own immediate past. Having such attitudes is vital to the generation of action and the management of ongoing actions. To illustrate, suppose there is a subject stood upright, with her left foot forwards, who shifts her weight from front to back in the course of moving her body. If this activity-part is all that she is aware of, and if she is not aware of her stepping forward with her left foot immediately previously, nor stepping back with her left foot as what will occur immediately subsequently, she can scarcely be said to be aware of what she is doing as salsa dancing. Yet we think that such a subject can be aware of what she is doing as salsa dancing, and so it appears plausible that she does have such an awareness of her immediate past and future.

²² In a discussion of the phenomenology of action, Elisabeth Pacherie (2008: 195) says that a typical agent has both a sense of initiation and sense of control over the actions being performed. Regardless of what the reader thinks of the distinction between these two senses, I take both to be captured by the readiness/potentiality to act under discussion.

²³ That we are – or at least can be – so aware of what we are doing is suggested by other passages in the literature. See, for example, O’Brien’s suggestion that: “we can obviously fail to know that we are acting, as when we are acting absent-mindedly . . . But it does not seem to be the case that our actions can be, as a matter of brute fact, beyond our ken . . . It seems to me that we cannot, in Shoemaker’s phrase, envisage a creature which is simply self-blind with respect to all their actions in this way . . . Surely if I have the power to initiate or stop what I am doing then what I am doing must normally be in some way accessible to me” (O’Brien, 2003: 364-6).

²⁴ That there is such an experience of agency may be somewhat supported by the clinical observation that this experience can be lost; in such cases one’s movements are observed in much the same way as the movements of others. See, for example, the discussions of Mellors (1970: 18) and Spence *et al.* (1997: 2000). On the loss of agency also see O’Shaughnessy (1963: 386).

Experience does not only possess a tripartite temporal structure in the context of intentional bodily action; we can say the same of paradigmatically mental activity such as experientially imagining some temporally extended occurrence. If the subject failed to have such attitudes that orient her towards her immediate past and future it is difficult to see how she could experience her imagining some particular occurrence over time as the (mental) activity that it is. It remains the case that awareness of the activity one is engaged in depends, in part, on an awareness of what one anticipates occurring in the immediate future and what one recalls occurring in the immediate past.

3.3. The enduring subject and time passing

With appeal to the tripartite temporal structure of experience being independently motivated, we can return to the issue of time seeming to pass. In wakeful experience, the subject is psychologically oriented to a time as what *she has* experienced immediately previously and to another as what *she anticipates* experiencing immediately subsequently, where this is contrasted with the time which is currently given in experience. Considering an object presented in experience, we can say that this object is experienced as wholly present now (in contrast to an occurrence), even though the subject is aware of experiencing it as wholly present immediately previously and anticipates experiencing it as wholly present immediately subsequently.

To be wholly present at one temporal location and then wholly present at another the object has to alter its temporal location relative to something (or something needs to move relative to it). To the subject, the object does not positively seem to be changing its temporal location relative *to her*. Perceptual experience is temporally transparent; it is not as though either the subject or the object seems to be left behind, in time. The object and subject do not seem (at least they need not seem) to be moving across space, phenomenologically speaking. Rather, the object's temporal location – and the subject's – seems to be progressing in time. Time seems to be passing; passing the subject and the object.

It does not follow from the above that time seeming to pass depends on perceiving objects as enduring; that the subject also seems to endure appears to be enough for time to seem to pass.²⁵

²⁵ On the idea that the subject seems to endure, also see Hofweber and Velleman who suggest that “[o]ne has the sense ... of being all there, or wholly present, at each moment of one’s life” (Hofweber and Velleman, 2011: 48). This is illustrated by Hofweber and Velleman in terms of the structure of episodic memory and imagination. With what

For a wakefully conscious agent, as experiencing continues on (and even if she is not perceiving a particular object), it is not as though the time she has an experiential point of view on – the PSP – is all of the time that there is. The subject has expectations about what will occur in her own immediate future – which she anticipates possessing an experiential point of view on – and an awareness of what was experienced as occurring in one’s immediate past – which she possessed an experiential point of view on. In virtue of this tripartite temporal structure of awareness, the subject is aware of a succession of times as successive, of herself occupying a given perspective in time, and of immediately previously occupying a perspective on an immediately preceding time.

The experiencing subject’s asymmetrical awareness of other times makes the time which the subject is aware of as ‘now’ – that which is given in experience – *seem* to be one which is incessantly changing. In ongoing wakeful experience the subject is aware of occupying successive perspectives on successive times while the subject need not seem to be moving. This is the sense in which time *seems* to pass: time seems to pass the subject who seems to endure.

This proposal allows us to account for the phenomenological ingredient at issue when theorists say that time *seems* to pass, without supposing that this is presented in perceptual experience. On this proposal, the two psychological orientations to the immediate past and future bookend the time given in experience, and this is how the subject is aware of a succession of times as successive. This makes the time the subject is aware of in experience seem to be incessantly changing and passing the subject. This proposal also accounts for the pervasiveness of the phenomenon, with time seeming to pass as long as the subject is wakefully conscious and experiencing, with her experience possessing this tripartite temporal structure.

The account offered of time seeming to pass is in need of a couple of qualifications. Firstly, note that while I have said that time seems to pass because of how the subject of experience seems to endure over time, this is not committed to any greater claims about how the structure of experience leads us to conceive of ‘the self’, or what we should say about how ‘the self’ in fact fills time. The proposal offered above is consistent with there being many other factors that feed into how we come to conceive of ‘the self’.

has been said regarding the tripartite temporal structure of experience we do not need to commit ourselves to the authors’ claims regarding episodic recall in order to arrive at a sense in which the subject seems to endure.

Secondly, having stressed that the tripartite structure of experience gains traction in agency, one immediate question would be: what about a conscious state in which there is complete passivity? This would be a state in which a subject is not only not engaged in overtly bodily activity, but a state where she is engaged in no activity whatsoever;²⁶ where the subject is not lost in thought (assuming this would itself qualify as a form of mental activity), but lost *between* or *without* thoughts. Perhaps that which is sometimes colloquially spoken about as ‘being in a daze’ or ‘a trance’ would fit this description.

In response, it is worth emphasising that the account I have advanced is an account of time’s seeming to pass for experiencing subjects in *wakeful consciousness*. It is difficult to say whether a state of complete passivity, absent of any intentional activity (mental or bodily), has any positively characterisable phenomenology. Even if it does, it is not at all obvious whether such a state should be thought of as a state of wakeful consciousness. As such, it is not at all clear whether we should say that time does seem to pass for a subject in such a state, although more would have to be said about what such a state consists in order to make a decisive commitment either way.

Concluding remarks

In order to account for the sense in which time seems to pass I have proposed that we should not be merely trying to articulate some feature of what is presented in perceptual experience. Developing some of O’Shaughnessy’s (2000) claims, I argued that we should be trying to articulate an aspect of wakeful consciousness that concerns the experiencing subject’s temporal perspective and the times which bookend the time presented in experience. Through a discussion of the phenomenology of agency, I developed and motivated O’Shaughnessy’s view of the tripartite temporal structure of wakeful consciousness, before explaining how it can account for time seeming to pass.

In wakeful consciousness, in addition to an experiential awareness of the time as the time that it is, an experiencing subject has a primitive and asymmetrical form of awareness of what was experienced in the immediate past and what is anticipated in the immediate future. That the subject is aware of what she just experienced and what is anticipated, in this distinctive sense, captures the

²⁶ Where such activity is to be construed as being poised to act or to change the course of the action one is engaged in.

sense in which the time an experiencing subject has a vantage point upon seems to be incessantly changing. This is the sense in which time *seems* to pass.