

R E V I E W

ROBIN LE POIDEVIN

The Images of Time: An Essay on Temporal Representation

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Le Poidevin's *Images* is a rewarding and imaginative treatment of the nature of temporal representation, nourished with a broad range of examples: perception, memory, pictorial art, and narrative fiction. A brief review cannot hope to capture all this. Instead I focus critically on two central themes.

I

Though interested in the nature of temporal representation for its own sake, Le Poidevin's guiding concern is to determine 'what ordinary representations of time [...] tell us about the metaphysical structure of time itself' (p. 5). Although he admits that 'the answer that we might initially be inclined to give to this question is: very little' (*ibid.*), Le Poidevin aims to convince us that our modes of temporal representation can only be satisfactorily accounted for by a tenseless ('B-theory') view of time.

After defending a number of claims regarding the links between causation, content, and knowledge in Chapter 2, and a series of principles about memory in the first part of Chapter 4 (see p. 62), Le Poidevin summarizes his key argument as follows.

- (1) Episodic memory requires a connection between the truth-makers of memory and the experience on which the memory is based, truth-makers that feature in the causal history of those states.
- (2) That connection cannot be articulated if temporal truths are all present truths.

Therefore:

- (3) Only the B-theory can provide a satisfactory account of episodic memory. (p. 68)

Imagine, for example, that on Monday Bernard feels blue. According to Le Poidevin, Bernard's belief on Monday that he feels blue is made true by the then fact that he feels blue. On Friday, Bernard recalls that he felt blue on Monday.¹ How does the A-theorist account for the truth of this memory? It seems, argues Le Poidevin, that the A-theorist cannot appeal to the original fact since that is no longer part of reality; it has been replaced by the fact that Bernard *felt* blue. Thus, the original truth-maker cannot make his present memory true. Le Poidevin holds that this is problematic because we now seem to lack an explanation as to why his memory can only be true if his earlier belief on Monday was true.

If the original belief and later memory have different (indeed, incompatible) truth-makers, why should the truth of the memory depend in any way upon the truth of the original belief? (p. 66)

Two broad strategies of A-theoretic response to this argument are considered, one concessive, one not.

The concessive strategy replies that Bernard's present memory that he felt blue can only be true if it was the case that *Bernard feels blue*; one preserves knowledge over time by continually standing in relation to some fact that is appropriately related to (though not identical with) the fact that was originally known.² Reconstructing, one can understand Le Poidevin as pressing two challenges here. First, if the original fact really has 'gone out of existence' (p. 66) and, moreover, relations entail the existence of their relata, it is hard to see how any such 'appropriate relation' could obtain. Second, since the truth-makers of both antecedent and consequent (in the first sentence of this paragraph) are present facts, no explanation has been offered of the connection between the memory's truth and the original belief's, unless the notion of 'appropriate relation' is spelt out. To the first challenge, the reply might be made that being an A-theorist need not include being a presentist. However, Le Poidevin seems entirely justified in pressing his second concern, something that might encourage the A-theorist to take a less concessive approach.

The non-concessive strategy denies that there is any need to engage in the project of finding 'appropriate relations'. According to the non-concessive theorist, the constitution of reality is irreducibly perspectival.³ Thus, from Friday's

¹ Strictly, this is a semantic memory and so, strictly, the argument is concerned with the 'truth-makers' of our *beliefs* about past, experienced events, i.e., the truth-makers of a certain class of semantic memories as opposed to being about episodic memory per se.

² cf. Brogaard ([unpublished], Chapter 1, p. 52) who, in replying to Richard's ([1981]) attack on temporalism, the view that propositions can change their truth-value over time, insists that 'one can . . . retain a belief . . . by maintaining a belief relation to an object that is appropriately related to the original object, namely the object of the original belief occurring within the scope of *some* past tense operator or other.'

³ For a sophisticated framework for thinking about these issues, see (Fine [2005]).

perspective, the truth-maker of Bernard's belief on Monday just is the fact that Bernard then felt blue. Bernard's memory of feeling blue has this very same fact as truth-maker. There is no gap between 'incompatible' truth-makers to bridge. Le Poidevin will object that Bernard's belief on Monday that he feels blue is made true by the then fact that he feels blue, and thus that no causal connection has been secured between this *original* truth maker of the belief as was on Monday, and Bernard's memory on Friday, flouting premise (1). But this objection fails to take seriously enough the key non-concessive claim that the *constitution* of reality is irreducibly relative. In talking of facts as were on Monday, one is talking about a different *reality*. Confining oneself to any one reality, there is no flouting of the kinds of causal principles Le Poidevin wishes to insist on. From Friday's point of view, the original truth maker of Bernard's belief on Monday *is* the fact that Bernard *felt* blue on Monday.

II

The idea that perceptual experience tells in favour of a certain metaphysical conception of time is stock-in-trade for the A-theorist, who standardly appeals to our experience as evidence for her view. Le Poidevin's discussion in Chapter 5 sets out to defuse this line of thought, first by helpfully distinguishing a variety of aspects of experience that the A-theorist might appeal to, then by showing how each can be accounted for by the B-theorist. Le Poidevin's scepticism regarding such appeals by the A-theorist is well founded. But B-theorist beware; endorsing this negative aspect of Le Poidevin's discussion need not commit one to his more controversial positive proposals.

First, take the A-theoretic appeal to the idea that we experience events as present. Le Poidevin replies that there is no interesting distinction between perceiving an event *as present* and simply perceiving it. Thus, the A-theorist 'has not identified any particular aspect of perception that requires explanation' (p. 78). If this is right, something needs saying to explain our inclination to regard star-gazing as involving temporal *illusion*. Le Poidevin suggests that perception at most *deludes* us because of the 'logically contingent' feature of perceptual experience that it is 'accompanied by present-tense beliefs' (*ibid.*). Someone who, *pace* Le Poidevin, is inclined to think that experience itself *intrinsically* warrants our present-tense beliefs will want to know what it is about the intrinsic nature of our experience itself that grounds specifically present-tense beliefs.⁴ A more conciliatory B-theoretic approach would be to question whether there was anything more to perceiving an event as present than perceiving it as occurring simultaneously with one's experience of it.⁵

⁴ Compare and contrast the dialectic in (Armstrong [1961], p. 144f.).

⁵ I do not mean to suggest that this strategy is ultimately successful.

Second, take the A-theoretic appeal to our experience of temporal properties (e.g., succession) and properties logically connected to time (e.g., motion). Le Poidevin begins by formulating ‘a phenomenological paradox’ (p. 87f.), which we can state as follows.

- (i) Everything we experience, we experience as present.⁶
- (ii) We experience succession, e.g., one note succeeding another.
- (iii) Yet, by definition, notes heard as successive cannot also both be heard as present.

There is only a difficulty here if we endorse a further assumption, viz., that succession (or motion), if experienced at all, must be wholly experienced at some one moment (cf. p. 92).⁷ Without that assumption, nothing blocks the view that our experience of succession involves *successively* experiencing sounds as present. At any moment we may be *experiencing* succession, but that fact holds only in virtue of our experience of succession over some longer interval. Our experience of unfolding events itself essentially unfolds over time.

Le Poidevin explicitly rejects the necessary assumption, when he endorses Dainton’s view that it is ‘deeply implausible’ that our experience of time can be analysed in terms of experience at particular instants (p. 79). However, he does not see that this defuses the paradox. Thus, he feels driven into the murky waters of the traditional debate concerning the perception of temporal properties, which exists precisely because of an acceptance of the additional assumption just flagged.

One way of conceiving the traditional debate is in terms of two rival camps: specious present theorists and memory theorists.⁸ Roughly, specious present theorists (e.g., Russell [1921]; Broad [1923]) hold that at any instant we are literally aware of extended periods of time; memory theorists (e.g., Reid [1827]; Husserl [1991]) deny this and hold that the perception of temporal properties is the joint upshot of our perception of the present instant, combined with very recent memory. In these terms, Le Poidevin endorses Kelly’s recent attack on the specious present theory (Kelly [2005]) before adopting a traditional form of memory theory on which, ‘What gives rise to the experience of pure succession [in a case where a C and an E are heard successively] . . . is the conjunction of the perception of E with the very recent memory of C’ (p. 92).

⁶ Curiously, given what has just been discussed, Le Poidevin does not discuss giving up this premise. Nonetheless, the ‘paradox’ is not resolved by adopting the token-reflexive approach just suggested.

⁷ We also need the questionable, though traditional, assumption (one that Le Poidevin endorses) that the present is instantaneous.

⁸ For this reviewer’s own conception and critique of the debate, see (Phillips [forthcoming]). Dainton ([2000]) offers an excellent introduction.

This view not only provides us with an escape from paradox but also, according to Le Poidevin, is quite acceptable to the B-theorist.⁹ Again: caveat emptor! This kind of theory faces notorious difficulties. In particular, it is extremely hard to see how it could apply to our experience of individual sounds.¹⁰ The obvious suggestion is that hearing a sound can be analysed as the hearing of a present ‘tone-phase’ conjoined with a memory of recent tone-phases. However, it seems impossible to conceive of a sound or sound-phase that does not have some duration. Given this, the proposed analysis simply takes for granted our perception of a present, yet temporally extended sound—just the kind of claim that supposedly engenders paradox and leads Le Poidevin, following Kelly, to regard the specious present theory as ‘unintelligible’ (p. 81). Both A- and B-theorists should eschew this approach. Instead they should agree with Dainton that experience cannot be analysed down to instants and deny that there is any paradox here.

In the final section of the chapter, Le Poidevin proposes the following, far more radical claim.

The datum of experience, that we experience motion, is . . . no mere passive reception of an objective phenomenon, but one that arises, in part, from the active interpretation of the mind. It is, at least in some cases, a *projection*.
(p. 93)

Where might motivation lie for this heady stuff? After all, one might well have thought that Le Poidevin’s memory-theory of succession had already accounted for our experience of motion.

Le Poidevin suggests that neuropsychology evinces projectivism. To update his sketch of the neuropsychology slightly, motion perception is subserved by a reference signal (see Wertheim [1994], [1999]), which serves an evaluative function in relation to data drawn exclusively from the retinal images. The reference signal combines (a) an ‘efference copy signal,’ providing information about oculomotor commands, used to determine eye velocity in relation to the head, (b) a ‘vestibular afferent signal,’ providing information related to the location and movement of the head in space, and (c) a ‘visual afferent signal,’ carrying information directly extracted from retinal image flows. Together, these inputs are used to distinguish eye-movement from object-movement.

Do these facts motivate the idea that perception involves the ‘active projection of states or events on to the world’? Not obviously. An alternative way to think about the neural structures noted above is as subserving perceptual consciousness, by making accessible to us (i.e., manifest in perceptual experience)

⁹ Indeed, if the argument discussed in Section I were successful, *only* available to the B-theorist.

¹⁰ A point elegantly brought out by Prichard ([1950]).

various features of the mind-independent empirical world.¹¹ In particular, the processing which combines the ‘reference signal’ with a purely retinal data-stream helps make accessible the motion properties of objects around us by ‘factoring out’ self-motion. On this view, to think of this neural activity as the ‘active interpretation of the mind,’ would be to make a subpersonal-/personal-level confusion. Certainly, things go awry and illusions occur (notoriously in lifts and trains). But why think illusory motion involves projection any more than illusory shape or size?¹²

III

At the end of *Images*, Le Poidevin expresses the hope that his study ‘indicates the possibility of a *rapprochement*—or perhaps *approchement* would be a better word—between two different traditions: on the one hand, the analytic philosophy of time, which has long been dominated by the philosophy of spacetime physics and the semantics of tense, and on the other, the phenomenological approach associated with writers such as Bergson and Husserl, which on the whole has been sceptical of metaphysical inquiry. . . . Phenomenology and metaphysics need not be strangers’ (pp. 178–9).

As Le Poidevin acknowledges, neither Bergson nor Husserl plays any significant role in *Images*. But we do not need to cross the channel to find phenomenological approaches to the philosophy of time. Discussion of time-consciousness within and without the Anglophone tradition in the heyday of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century was remarkably unified in its concern to explain the nature of our temporal experience.¹³ This phenomenological focus was inseparable from metaphysical theorising—witness the opposing views of Russell and Bergson.¹⁴ Nor was it separated from physics, or science more generally. Indeed, a major (if not *the* major) argument for sense-data was the time-lag argument.¹⁵ And other scientific arguments were often adduced by philosophers in arguing for their preferred view of perceptual experience. One very obvious example being Broad’s *Scientific Thought*, which a contemporary reviewer declares ‘to bring the philosophy based on experience abreast of current scientific achievement’ (Brown [1923], p. 691), by which is primarily

¹¹ cf. (Campbell [2002], pp. 118–20) and (Brewer [2004], pp. 69–70).

¹² Le Poidevin also mentions the ‘flash-lag’ illusion. Here I think there is a genuine and important challenge to our naïve picture of temporal perception, a challenge pressed most forcefully by Dennett and Kinsbourne ([1992]). But that is a matter for another time; Le Poidevin does not dwell on those concerns.

¹³ For an excellent introductory survey, see (Andersen and Grush [2009]), especially their remarks on Husserl and Hodgson.

¹⁴ See especially (Russell [1914]).

¹⁵ Anglophone discussions include (Russell [1912], pp. 16–7, [1948], p. 204) and (Broad [1923], pp. 376–86) though there are phenomenological discussions too; for example, (Husserl [1991], p. 114, Appendix V). Leibniz offers an early statement of the argument ([1981], pp. ix, 8).

meant spacetime physics.¹⁶ Certainly, Husserl declines this approach when he introduces the technical notion of the phenomenological reduction, but even so his principal concerns (and indeed theories) are shared with Anglophone writers of the time.

This all suggests that issues to do with the metaphysics of time and the problems of time-consciousness have not been strangers because of a divergence of analytic and phenomenological traditions. Indeed, it seems more plausible to locate the gulf within the modern analytic tradition itself, which in the second half of the last century has allowed metaphysics and philosophy of perception (and indeed aesthetics) to drift apart in a way that would have deeply puzzled our forebears.¹⁷ In this light, *Images* is a most welcome champion of *rapprochement*.¹⁸

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¹⁶ But see also (Bergson [1914]) for an approach steeped in contemporary science.

¹⁷ One obvious explanation is sense-datum fatigue.

¹⁸ Thanks to Matt Soteriou and Lee Walters for very helpful comments.

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