

# The Problem of Time's Passage: Using Historical Arguments to Inform the Debate

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## ABSTRACT

While the B-theory of time seems to fit with the current physical theory, it also seems to require treating temporal passage as an illusion. The aim of this article is to show that by understanding cases of apparent motion in a particular way, one can maintain the B-theory while also retaining the privileged status that the phenomenon of temporal passage plays in human experience. However, to understand these cases correctly, one should turn to arguments in the history of philosophy. More specifically, arguments from Russell, Kant and Hume can be used to make the B-theory more plausible.

## KEYWORDS

Apparent Motion, Barry Dainton, Bertrand Russell, B-Theory of Time, David Hume, History of Philosophy, Immanuel Kant, Metaphysics, Temporal Passage

## INTRODUCTION

In the debate concerning the metaphysics of time, two general camps have emerged: A-theorists and B-theorists.<sup>1</sup> Generally, an A-theorist employs “tensed” concepts when discussing time. That is, for the A-theorist, time passes from the past to the present to the future. There are several varieties of A-theorists, and what the passage of time entails will change depending on one’s ontological commitments.<sup>2</sup> B-theorists generally deny “tensed” concepts. They tend to argue for eternalism, while denying that anything “becomes present and then more and more past” (Deng 2013, p. 367). As Simon Prosser puts the point, for the B-theorist, “tenses have no mind-independent reality” (2000, p. 494). Thus, one important area of disagreement between most A and B-theorists involves the passage or flow of time. A-theorists argue that time passes, and attempt to provide a metaphysical account of how that passage occurs, while B-theorists deny the passage of time. Many B-theorists argue that what we perceive as the passage of time is merely an illusion; the apparent difference between past, present, and future is merely a feature of our psychology.

While there are several arguments supporting the different varieties of the A-theory, one obvious reason to adopt it is that it seems to fit our experience of the world. As George Schlesinger writes, “[T]here is hardly any experience that seems more persistently, or immediately given to us than the relentless flow of time. All of us are greatly concerned about time’s swift passage, and wonder why ‘there is no arresting of the vast wheel of Time’, the direction of which, we often wish we could reverse...” (1991, p. 427). Thus, the privileged experience that temporal passage plays in one’s life provides reason to argue for some version of the A-theory.

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The main worry with the A-theory, according to the B-theorist, is that the picture of time provided by relativistic physics challenges the claim that the experience of the passage of time has any mind-independent reality. According to special relativity, there is no unique present and there is no absolute simultaneity. Events that appear simultaneous to one observer may appear successive to another, and there is no privileged frame of reference. But if this is the case, then something that occurs in the present moment to one observer may occur in the future to another observer. Thus, the B-theorist argues, past and present are mind-dependent.

Those interested in the metaphysics of time seem to be left with a difficult choice: should one claim that a fundamental feature of human experience is merely an illusion, or should one seek a new scientific explanation that can better account for that fundamental feature.<sup>3</sup> Recently, several philosophers have attempted to make the B-theory more plausible by showing that the illusion of time's passage may be similar to other experiences that arise from an illusion. One strategy to help explain how time's passage could be mind-dependent involves examining cases of apparent motion. Versions of this strategy have been employed by both L. A. Paul and Barry Dainton. This paper examines this strategy, focusing mainly on Dainton's version of the argument. The goal of the paper is twofold. The first is to show that if one uses a strategy similar to Dainton's, one can maintain the B-theory while also retaining the privileged status that the phenomenon of temporal passage plays in human experience. The second is to stress the importance that arguments in the history of philosophy can play in current discussions of the metaphysics of time. It can be quite tempting to dismiss arguments from historical figures, especially when some of those arguments may predate relativistic physics. However, the strategy Dainton employs has its roots in the history of philosophy, and if one attends to arguments from Russell, Kant, and Hume, one can better explain the B-theory and respond to some of the challenges to Dainton's view.

The strategy of turning to apparent motion involves three components: 1) a static theory of motion, 2) an account of apparent motion, and 3) some explanation of how features of motion may relate to time's passage. In what follows, each of these components is examined in detail. The first section focuses on Russell's static theory of motion, which maintains that our experience of motion is not a proper description of the metaphysics of motion. The second and third sections describe the phenomenon of apparent motion (focusing mainly on Dainton's account of apparent motion), and how arguments initially constructed by Kant and Hume can help explain how motion is linked to time's passage. The final section considers a challenge to Dainton's strategy and explains how the challenge can be met by returning to arguments from Russell and Hume.

## THE STATIC THEORY OF MOTION

In order to understand the strategy of turning to cases of apparent motion to comprehend time's passage, it is necessary to understand the static theory of motion. The static theory of motion maintains that our experience of motion is not a proper description of the metaphysics of motion. Bertrand Russell provides such a theory, which has been called the "at-at" theory of motion. Russell's theory was not a response to worries about temporal experience, but rather was meant as a means of overcoming difficulties raised by Zeno's paradoxes of motion.<sup>4</sup> Specifically, Russell ties the theory to Zeno's third argument. Russell describes the paradox of the third argument in the *Principles of Mathematics*. He writes:

*The third argument is concerned with the arrow. 'If everything is in rest or in motion in a space equal to itself, and if what moves is always in the instant, the arrow in its flight is immovable.' This has usually been thought so monstrous a paradox as scarcely to deserve serious discussion. To my mind, I must confess, it seems a very plain statement of a very elementary fact, and its neglect has, I think, caused the quagmire in which the philosophy of change has long been immersed...I shall set forth a theory...which may be called static, since it allows justice to Zeno's remark. (1996, p. 350)*

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