The Indubitable Nature of Temporality in Perception

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Recommended Citation
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Published online: 07 June 2012
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Abstract

The flow of time is vital for perception. While philosophers disagree as to the nature of how time is represented, i.e. that the passage of time is that of mere tense or belonging to the nature of the experienced, it is generally accepted that the represented somehow tells us about the future, present and past. My contention is that this temporal character is indubitable for perception. I will begin by providing a temporal model of how percepts are represented. After giving a detailed presentation of the model, some problems will be considered, namely that the temporal model is doomed by the reversal of causal relata or no different than an unsuccessful perceptual experience. My contention will be that what is being represented possesses fundamental temporal qualities that are indubitable for the experience, regardless of metaphysical worries or perceptual worries. If such temporal qualities belonging to the represented go without say, then a question remains as to the status of the temporal character of perception. After contrasting Kant’s position with Husserl’s position on the status of temporality in perception, I will argue that Kant’s position on perceptual temporality as manifesting from a cognitive faculty is more plausible.

1. Introduction

The flow of time is vital for perception. While philosophers disagree as to the nature of how time is represented and experienced, i.e. that the passage of time is that of mere tense or belonging to the nature of the experienced, it is generally accepted that the represented somehow tells us about the future, present and past. My contention is that this characteristic is indubitable for perceptual experience. I will begin by analyzing Kant’s response to Hume in the second analogy in Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason and by providing a model of how percepts are organized in perception. After giving a detailed presentation of the model, some problems will be considered, namely that the temporal model is doomed by the possibility of the metaphysical reversal of causal relata or no different than an unsuccessful perceptual experience. My contention will be that what is being represented possesses fundamental temporal qualities that are indubitable for the perception, regardless of metaphysical worries or perceptual worries. If such temporal qualities belonging to the represented go without say, then a question remains as to the status of the temporal character of perception. After contrasting Kant’s position with Husserl’s position on the status of temporality in perception, I will argue that Kant’s position on perceptual temporality as manifesting from a cognitive faculty is more plausible.

2. Temporality as Fundamental to Perception

David Hume drew on the nature of temporality to advance his argument against causal relations. Enter Kant. While Kant does not totally disagree with the Hume’s worry, he will highlight something that is
fundamental to the phenomenological experience of causal relations in the second analogy of the *Critique of Pure Reason*:

> I perceive that appearances follow one another, that is, that there is a state of things at one time the opposite of which was in the preceding time. Thus I am really connecting two perceptions in time. Now connection is not the work of mere sense and intuition, but is here the product of a synthetic faculty of imagination, which determines inner sense in respect of the time-relation. (Kant, 1926, p. 218 [233])

For Kant, the temporal qualities of perception are fundamental. That is, percepts are represented as about to happen, happening now, and having already occurred in succession. The fact that Kant states that the flow of experience is made possible by a “synthetic faculty of imagination,” anchors the temporal character of the event experience in perception.

Let us imagine a case in which we are perceiving event A, followed by event B, then event C. Event A occurs firstly but is replaced by B and B is experienced as happening now. C follows B and A is represented has having occurred before B and B before C.

![Figure 1](image)

In figure 1, the flow of the experience is represented with an arrow. The arrow is illustrated as having passed through event A and B. Suppose that event A, B and C represent different temporal stages between causal relata. Event A could represent a cue ball on a pool table en route towards the eight ball (event B), which lands in the corner pocket (event C). Regardless of what else might be involved in the metaphysical nature of the causal event, one thing is for certain, that the event, however it occurred, will have to conform to our cognitive capacities for representing the event. Whether some ghostly ethereal force caused, along with the cue ball, to knock the eight ball into the corner pocket, the experience will show one event happening after another in succession. Here is the where Kant’s argument against Hume gains momentum. If the experiencing of the event contains the temporal characteristic of events happening in succession, that is, one after another, and this is indubitable for perception, then what can we really say about the qualities experienced in perception? We can, at the very least, say with certainty that the experience will be experienced in succession.

### 2.1. Temporality and Time Reversal

First, let us entertain the possibility of experiencing the abovementioned event in reverse. Instead of the cue ball hitting the eight ball into the corner pocket, the corner pocket spits out the eight ball hitting the cue ball where the hitting of the cue ball first occurs. Who is to say that all of our experiences aren’t subject to this conceptual worry – that all of our perceptual experiences fool us into believing that causal succession is represented as going forward, when the inverse is the case. Let us entertain the possibility of experiencing the event backwards.
Figure 2 illustrates the event as experienced phenomenologically. \( A_t^3 \) is when the eight ball is experienced as coming out of the corner pocket. \( B_t^2 \) occurs when the eight ball makes impact with the cue ball. \( C_t^1 \) is experienced after the cue ball has been hit by the eight ball and lands where the hit first occurred in the figure 1. Since we are referring to the phenomenological experiencing of \( A_t^3 \rightarrow B_t^2 \rightarrow C_t^1 \) and not the metaphysical nature of the how the causal event came about, identifying the \( A_t^3 \rightarrow B_t^2 \rightarrow C_t^1 \) experience as occurring synonymously with the temporal ordering of \( t_1^1 \rightarrow t_2^2 \rightarrow t_3^3 \) doesn’t seem problematic. As we can see, regardless of how the event occurred metaphysically, we can still describe the event as occurring in succession experientially. The perceiver experiences event \( C_t^1 \) as happening at \( t_3^3 \) and before \( B_t^2 / t_2^2 \). \( B_t^2 / t_2^2 \) is experienced as occurring before \( A_t^3 / t_1^1 \). The metaphysical nature of the causal event does not effect how the event is experienced by the perceiver. If asked to give a report of my experiences, one event will invariably follow the other in a fundamental temporal sequence. I will say that \( A_t^3 \rightarrow B_t^2 \rightarrow C_t^1 \) occurred synonymously with \( t_1^1 \rightarrow t_2^2 \rightarrow t_3^3 \), such that \( A_t^3 / t_1^1 \rightarrow B_t^2 / t_2^2 \rightarrow C_t^1 / t_3^3 \). Whether the metaphysical nature of the event occurred in such a way that the causal relata involved in the sequence was too fine-grained to make an accurate metaphysical judgment, or whether the event occurred in reverse – these charges brought against the fundamentality of temporality are subsumed under the same temporal ordering.

2.2. Non-veridicality and Temporality

In philosophy of perception, hallucinations and illusions are considered by many unsuccessful perceptual experiences. Depending on where one stands on indiscriminability, ones position about how perceptual experiences are epistemically justified may vary. This section operates under the assumption that successful and unsuccessful percepts are easily distinguishable, which may or may not be the case. By distinguishable, I mean that unsuccessful perceptual experiences differ by mental content. This move is to advance and grant the charge that the experiencing of temporal relations in perception are no different than non-veridical cases in perception.

A possible threat to the fundamentality of temporality in perception is the charge that the experience itself may be illusory. The charge that it is possible for the experiencing of temporality in perception to be no different than misrepresenting of an object in perception still doesn’t threaten the fundamentality of temporality, even in a phenomenon as seemingly threatening as Akinetopsia where:

… sufferers lose the ability to see movement whilst retaining the ability to see other properties, such as color, form, and orientation … When filling the teacup sufferers see the liquid level jump from level to level rather than rise gently. Probably the closest experience for normal perceivers would be the experience of seeing moving objects under strobe lighting. However, such a parallel should not be taken too literally. (Fish, 2010, p. 129)
Imagine the experiencing of the cue ball hitting the eight ball into the corner pocket through the lens of Akinetopsia. Obviously the judgment that the event occurred drastically with no movement between the hitting of the eight ball and the cue ball is incorrect. There was a definite distance the cue ball needed to travel to get to the eight ball, whether our perceiver noticed it or not does not change matters of fact. One thing we cannot question is the order in which the experiences came about. Again, one event invariably followed another in experience, whether it occurred under Akinetopsia or in a dark room with a strobe light is arbitrary. Non-veridical percepts still do not threaten the temporal structure of how we represent events. Even if our present experiences filter facts that are essential for understanding the metaphysical underpinnings of reality, the fact that perception is organized temporally doesn’t change.

3. Temporality as a Cognitive Mechanism or a Feature of How Perception Represents?

Now that we have shown temporality to be a fundamental characteristic of perception, there is a deep question regarding the status of temporal representation. Is it a cognitive mechanism that governs our experiences or simply a representation itself? We have already established the indubitable character of temporal sequencing in perception, but how does this experience come about? In Husserl’s *On the Phenomenology of the Consciousness of Internal Time*, he stresses the fundamentality of flow in experience, but a difficulty arises as to the status of this fundamental flow:

But then the following difficulty arises. I surely do know of the flow of consciousness as flow. I can look at it … it forms, so it seems, a unity in memory. Does not the flow of consciousness therefore also become constituted in consciousness as a unity? ... And must we then not also go on to say that this unity becomes constituted in an altogether analogous way and is every bit as much a constituted temporal series, and that one must therefore surely speak of a temporal now, before and after? (Husserl, p. 391, [380])

In other words, if I am aware of this temporal sequence in consciousness, doesn’t the recognizing of a temporal sequence also satisfy the requirements for that constitute membership as a constituent of the temporal series? When experiencing and giving a report of $t_1 \rightarrow t_2 \rightarrow t_3$, isn’t the acknowledging of this temporal series as unified in my qualitative experience of the event just as fundamental as the flow, which my experiences are committed to? It seems as though this issue presses the on the ontological status of my experiencing $t_1 \rightarrow t_2 \rightarrow t_3$. If Husserl is willing to concede that consciousness of internal time has features indicative of a representation, however he decides to carve it out, then it seems that his treatment of the issue is doomed to infinite regress. The closest Husserl ever gets to admitting that the perception of a temporal sequence (what he calls the “temporal act”) is itself a representation is in his discussion of his teacher Brentano:

Behind his discussion of Brentano and Meinong is Husserl’s contention that the perception of a temporal object “is itself a temporal object and as such has its phases” (235). A melody, for example runs off phase by phase, but so does the act that intends it. (Husserl, 1980, p. XXXIII)

If my consciousness of the time sequence $t_1 \rightarrow t_2 \rightarrow t_3$ itself becomes some kind of a representation (a temporal object), which Husserl doesn’t deny, then my percept can itself become a constituent in experience $T^1$, where $T^1$ means to be conscious of $t_1 \rightarrow t_2 \rightarrow t_3$. If I am conscious of $T^1$ as a temporal
object, then consciousness of $T^1$ is not exempt from being considered yet another temporal object $T^2$ – infinite regress.

For Kant, subsuming events under a temporal order is characteristic of a cognitive mechanism. For Kant there are various cognitive faculties but he ascribes the awareness of temporality in perception as manifesting from a synthetic faculty of imagination. Wilfrid Sellars describes this faculty as being that of a constructive sort: “perceptual consciousness involves the constructing of sense-image models of external objects. This construction is the work of the imagination responding to the stimulation of the retina” (Sellars, 1978).

If Kant is correct and the fundamental temporal character of perceptual experience is governed and constructed by our cognitive faculties, then it seems that the fundamentality of temporality faces no threat of infinite regress. The threat of infinite regress only comes about when we regard temporality in perception as being merely a representation. But if we anchor our perception of temporality in a cognitive faculty, then it is more plausible to imagine the experience of time as being a construction – a mechanism that filters experience as happening in a determined temporal order that is indubitable for perception. Our minds are simply the conduit through which experiences enter and are organized by the faculties already present in cognition. This seems to be more plausible route than Husserl’s solution. Kant states:

All empirical knowledge involves the synthesis of the manifold by the imagination. This synthesis is always successive, that is, the representations in it are always sequent upon one another … But if this synthesis is a synthesis of apprehension of the manifold of a given appearance, the order is determined in the object, or, so to speak more correctly, is an order of successive synthesis that determines the object. (Kant, 1926, p. 226 [A 201])

The mind subsumes events in reality under a temporal order that reflects how the subject exists in relation to what is being perceived. As Kant notes, this synthesis is “always successive,” which means that regardless of how metaphysically complex the causal relationship may be between the cue ball and the eight ball, the perception of succession still stands.

4. Conclusion

Time is indispensable for perception. The abovementioned charges brought against the fundamentality of perception fall short in that they don’t directly threaten the perceiving of time sequences. The metaphysical nature of causation, and how one ought to go about conceiving of causal relata do not threaten temporal representation in perception, because even in the most outlandish cases, where we entertained the possibility of time sequences occurring in reverse the sequence can still be described in the time sequence $At^3\rightarrow Br^2 \rightarrow Ct^1$. There is still succession. As noted previously, even if some ghostly force where involved in the eight ball coming out of the corner pocket, the experience shows one event occurring invariably after another. Another worry was that maybe the experiencing of causal sequences temporally are no different than a flawed perceptual experience. Aside from the fact that there is no way of telling how temporal representation could be deemed as unsuccessful, even in cases where the perceiver is suffering from a disorder like Akinetopsia, there is still a temporal order, regardless of what or what isn’t seen in between. Finally, after contrasting Husserl’s concerns about the status of the
fundamental temporal flow with Kant’s position, a stronger position would be to claim that the perceiving of time sequences is a product of a cognitive mechanism. There is no reason to believe that the indubitable nature of temporality in perception doesn’t involve some sort of representing that emerges out of our cognitive capacities. The problem of infinite regress only arises when we ascribe our perceiving of time the characteristics of a mere representation.

References


