

Becky Clay
Dr. Marcello Fiocco
3-10-11
Phil 120

Experience and the Nature of Temporal Reality

The fundamental issue concerning the metaphysics of time is whether temporal reality is homogeneous or heterogeneous. In an effort to determine which view is the correct view, two main features of temporal experience are explored: one, the presence of experience itself, and two, our different attitudes towards past and future experiences. Because the natural response to each phenomenon seems to point to temporal reality being heterogeneous, the “B” or “tenseless” theorist (the philosopher who accepts that the world in time is homogeneous) is responsible for providing a tenseless account of these phenomena. Ultimately, because the tenseless theorist is able to provide these tenseless accounts, the question of whether the world in time is heterogeneous or homogeneous remains unanswered.

The philosopher that accepts the world in time to be ontologically homogeneous is committed to the theory that everything in time shares the same ontological status, and that there are no distinctive temporary temporal properties (such as pastness, presentness, and futurity) that distinguish one moment from another. The heterogeneous view of temporal reality claims that everything in time does not share the same ontological status, and that there are distinctive temporal properties that distinguish one moment from another. The moments in the homogeneous view hold permanent temporal relations to one another, while the moments in the heterogeneous view hold permanent temporal relations to one another in addition to possessing temporary temporal properties.

Each of these views, the heterogeneous and the homogeneous, associates itself with a different account of what it means to “cease to exist.” On the heterogeneous view, ceasing to exist means to go out of existence entirely and to no longer exist anywhere in the temporal series. This account is required by the heterogeneous view because it consistently maintains that all moments in time have a different

ontological status. On the homogeneous view, however, to cease to exist means to exist at some moment and then not at some subsequent moment, while still existing at the first moment. For example, there are many moments that have occurred prior to this current moment, yet both this current moment and the earlier moments all exist equally in temporal reality. There are no distinctive temporary temporal properties that distinguish one moment from another; all moments are all equally real. This account is required by the homogeneous view because it consistently holds that all moments in time share the same ontological status.

The homogeneous, or “tenseless,” view often gives rise to several misleading interpretations, as presented by Nathan Oaklander in his essay, “On the Experience of Tenseless Time.” Three common misinterpretations he provides are: 1) that experiences exist tenselessly outside of time, 2) that all experiences occur at every moment, and 3) that experiences are observed from a perspective outside of time as parts of a “never changing present.” Each of these explanations is a distortion of the homogeneous view because they are not at all what the tenseless theorist claims. For one, the tenseless theorist believes that all experiences exist *in* time, and are, in some sense, what make up temporal reality. Secondly, the tenseless theorist does not believe that all experiences exist at every moment, but rather, that each moment exists only at itself. For example, moment one occurs at moment one, and moment two occurs at moment two, but moment two will never occur at moment one. Both moments will always exist in temporal reality and will always share the same ontological status, but they will never exist together in one moment. Thirdly, the tenseless theorist holds that because our existence is within time, any consciousness of our experiences stems from a temporal point of view, not any perspective that is located outside of time.

Scott Hestevold presents two arguments in his essay, “Passage and the Presence of Experience,” in an attempt to show that temporal reality includes temporary temporal properties. The first argument he utilizes is the “Thank goodness that’s over” argument, used to illustrate our attitudes towards the

past and future, and the second argument he employs has to do with the presence of experience. In the “Thank goodness that’s over” argument, Hestevold asserts that what explains a feeling of dread towards an undesired future event (such as a tooth extraction) is that the event has the property of futurity, and that what explains a feeling of relief towards an unpleasant past event is that the event has the property of pastness. Similarly, in his argument regarding the presence of experience, Hestevold claims that the way one knows an experience to be present is by it having the temporary temporal property of presentness.

Oaklander, being a tenseless theorist, denies that Hestevold’s arguments require the acceptance of temporary temporal properties. He constructs a tenseless response to each and argues that what explains the feeling of dread towards an undesired future event is the fact that one exists tenselessly *before* the undesired event. What explains the feeling of relief after an unpleasant event is the fact that one exists tenselessly *after* the unpleasantness. Because Oaklander is able to explain our feelings towards past and future events without positing temporary temporal properties, it seems that he was correct to challenge Hestevold. Oaklander’s tenseless response to the presence of experience argument is that, in order to make the judgment that an experience is present, one is determining that the experience is simultaneous with the judgment about it. He argues that because one is always conscious of her experiences when they are happening, one cannot help but know that they are occurring at that moment.

In the end, it seems that there is no definitive evidence for concluding that temporal reality is either heterogeneous or homogeneous. While the natural response to the attitudes we have towards past, present and future events seem to be the positing of temporal properties, the tenseless theorist is able to show that such a move is not necessary to account for the nature of temporal reality. Because both views seem to accurately capture one’s experience of the world in time, it seems that neither can be concluded as the “correct” view based solely on these two arguments.