

## A Tale of Two Williams: James, Stern, and the Specious Present\*

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**Abstract:** As a typical subject, you experience a variety of paradigmatically temporal phenomena. Looking out of the window in the English summer, you can see leaves *swaying* in the breeze and hear the pitter-patter of raindrops *steadily increasing* against the window. In discussions of temporal experience, and through reflecting on examples such as those offered, two phenomenological claims are widely – though not unequivocally – accepted: firstly, you perceptually experience motion and change; secondly, while more than a momentary state of affairs is presented in your ongoing perceptual experience, that which is presented nonetheless seems to be of a quite limited temporal extent. These two claims are frequently tied to the notion of the specious present. However, there has recently been a push back against the supposed link between perceived motion and the specious present. I argue that there are two ways of understanding this link, and while one has recently been the target of criticism, the other withstands such criticism. My overarching aim is to clarify the notion of the specious present through a discussion of the notion’s origins, in addition to recent criticism directed at the notion, with the hope of reframing how contemporary debates proceed.

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## Introductory remarks

Consider perceiving some moving object, such as visually perceiving a ball that is rolling down an incline, or some changing stimuli, such as listening to a tone that is gradually increasing in volume. There are two aspects of such cases that I am concerned to bring out. Firstly, you see the ball *moving*; you hear the volume of the tone *changing*. You perceptually experience motion and change.<sup>1</sup> Secondly, when you are perceptually aware of the ball at the bottom of the incline you are no longer perceptually aware of the ball being at the top of the incline, which occurred a few seconds earlier. While it is plausible that more than a momentary state of affairs is presented in ongoing perceptual experience, that which is presented nonetheless seems to be of a quite limited temporal extent. These two phenomenological claims, that experiencing subjects perceive motion/change and that what is presented in experience is (in a certain sense) temporally limited, are frequently discussed in the context of the specious present.

It is common in recent debates for theorists to appeal to the specious present, as the limited temporal extent presented in experience, and to debate what accounts for its temporal extent. (On this way of formulating the debate, see Andersen [2014, 26] and Dainton [2016]; for a recent discussion which displays scepticism about the differences between apparently competing accounts of the temporal microstructure of the specious present, see Prosser [2016, 147].) On one view, experiencing is itself said to be temporally extended, as is that which is presented in experience; there being an explanatory relation between the two. In terminology from Dainton (2016), these may be referred to as extensional accounts.<sup>2</sup> On the opposing view, such an explanatory connection is denied; yet, that which is presented in experience is also said to possess a non-zero temporal extension. In terminology from Dainton (2016), these may be referred to as retentional accounts.<sup>3</sup> (Such accounts are often described as appealing to punctate experiences that present temporally extended occurrences. Yet, while the retentional theorist denies the explanatory relationship between the temporal profile of experience and that which is presented in experience that the extensional theorist asserts, she need be read as appealing to *punctate* experiences.) Broadly, debates between advocates of either view are concerned with the temporal extent that is presented in perceptual experience (or the *content*); the temporal extent of the perceptual experience (or the *act*); and how the previous two relate to one another. My main aim herein is not to enter such a debate, but to elucidate the notion of the specious present itself and to rethink how it appears in contemporary discussions of temporal experience.

Reflection on the historical (and some contemporary) literature reveals two different ways of motivating an appeal to the specious present, to be outlined and explained in what follows. I begin by looking to the origins of the notion of the specious present, and how it earns its name, in discussions from our two Williams: James (1890) and Stern (1897). I then turn to the two ways in which James and Stern – and theorists writing since – can be read as motivating an appeal to the specious present; motivations that need to be pulled apart (§2). While the two are of course intimately related, I demonstrate that it is important to distinguish between them (§3), because criticism that can be fairly raised against one would be misplaced if raised against the other.

Finally, (in §4) I consider one reason theorists may have for being sceptical of the Jamesian motivation and which may therefore explain the tendency to focus on the Sternian motivation – arising from worries concerning how we are to draw the distinction between perception and memory – but I argue that insofar as one feels pressure from such scepticism, this pressure applies equally to each way of motivating an appeal to the specious present and so each should continue to be equally discussed.

## 1. The Origins of the Specious Present

The term ‘specious present’ was introduced into the wider philosophical and psychological literature in William James’ *Principles of Psychology* (1890). As developed by James, the specious present is said to be a short duration of which we are *immediately and incessantly sensible*, characterised in contrast to the mathematical present. In his discussion of the perception of time, James says that the mathematical present, the instantaneous point of contact between past and future, “is, in fact, an altogether ideal abstraction, not only never realized in sense, but probably never even conceived of by those unaccustomed to philosophic meditation...” (James 1890, 406). He says that the mathematical present is not realised in sense because he takes our experience to present something temporally thicker: “The only fact of our immediate experience is what Mr. E. R. Clay has well called ‘the *specious* present.’” (James 1890, 406). In taking the specious present to be the only fact of immediate experience, James can be read as saying that the interval of time picked out by the specious present is that interval which we can become aware of when we reflect on our experience (rather than an abstract conception of what ‘the present time’ denotes).

While James may have popularised the notion of the specious present, he did not coin the term; the genesis of this terminology is credited to Kelly.<sup>4</sup> Kelly, quoted approvingly by James, says that “[a]ll the notes of a bar of a song seem to the listener to be contained in the present” (Kelly; quoted by James 1890, 406); this is to be contrasted with the whole song, which does not seem to be present, in this sense, to the experiencing subject. The thought behind Kelly’s appeal to the bar of music appears to be that what is given in experience seems to be of some non-zero interval, and yet of some limited temporal spread.

As characterised by Kelly, there are two related ways of capturing the sense in which ‘the present’ under discussion is supposed to be specious. Firstly, let’s assume – as Kelly does – that an appeal to ‘the present time’ is typically, in philosophical discussions, in reference to what James calls the mathematical present. To the extent that our experience presents an interval as being present – and a whole bar of notes can be presented *as present*, according to Kelly – this is specious in that it suggests that something of some temporal extent is present, as opposed to the extensionless moment. Secondly, we could interpret Kelly as saying that our experience is specious in that what it presents as being present is really part of the past. Being of some positive temporal extent, Kelly suggests that the occurrences presented over the specious present must have already happened, on pain of otherwise saying that what is presented in experience is really part of the future (and given the assumption that there is an extensionless present moment). Taking a subject’s experience to present part of the recent past, Kelly says that this is not how it seems to the experiencing subject. That which is presented in experience must therefore be occurrences belonging to the past, speciously given as of the present.

Taking the notion of the specious present from Kelly, James holds that there is an important sense in which a subject’s experience seems to present the present (rather than the past or future), and that which is so presented seems to be of some temporal extent. Note that this is focusing on *perceptual* experience. The same might be said of a subject’s experiential occurrences more generally, but this would require spelling out how in memory and imagination the subject can seem to have a present representation of a non-present time. In the current content I leave this complication to one side.

Writing shortly after James, William Stern appeals to a similar notion that he terms *presence-time*.<sup>5</sup> Motivated by an attempt to explain how subjects perceive motion and change – Stern appeals to speech perception, the observation of movement, and hearing a sustained or gradually changing

tone, as probative examples (1897, 317) – Stern also appeals to a temporal extent that is presented in experience. In similar fashion to James’s and Kelly’s appeals to the specious present, Stern says that: “Immediate perception is ... ‘present’, yet ‘present’ in a different manner than as in a logical abstraction, neither as a mathematical point nor as the mere limit between what has past and what is yet to come, but rather (and regardless how brief), as a positive and finite stretch of time” (*ibid.*, 325).

While the discussions of James and Stern share many parallels, they also reveal two different ways of motivating an appeal to the specious present, something that has stuck with discussions of the specious present over the past century. As a result, it is unclear how to interpret some of the arguments concerning the specious present. For the sake of clarity, I first (§2.1) focus upon the way of motivating an appeal to the specious present that can be read in Stern’s discussion, and in Broad (1923) writing after Stern. In this context the specious present is to be motivated in terms of an explanatory role it is introduced to serve: accounting for those cases of motion which are perceptible and those which are imperceptible. In §2.2 I demonstrate that there is a different way of motivating an appeal to the specious present, which can be read in James’s and Kelly’s discussions of the notion. (This is not to say that the other motivation for appealing to the specious present cannot also be read in the writing of James and Kelly.)<sup>6</sup> I emphasise the utility of distinguishing between these two ways of motivating an appeal to the specious present through a discussion of Prosser’s argument against the specious present (in §3).

## 2. Why appeal to the Specious Present?

### 2.1. *Accounting for perceptible motion*

Stern says that we do not typically take ourselves to *only* infer motion and change, in at least some cases we take ourselves to perceptually experience motion and change: “Duration, succession, rhythmic patterns, speed, and acceleration can be perceived directly...” (Stern 1897, 323). However, he recognises that this would be incompatible with two further claims. The first is the momentariness of consciousness, where this is the idea that experience does not present anything of a non-zero temporal extent (or that the only temporal relation experience can present is that of simultaneity). This is what Stern refers to as “[t]he dogma of the momentariness of a whole of consciousness...” (*ibid.*, 321); according to which “only those contents can belong to a whole of

consciousness that exist together and are simultaneously present at any given time and, therefore, that an ideal cross-section at any given moment in the life of the soul would have to contain every element belonging to that whole of consciousness” (*ibid.*, 313). The second is the idea that motion and change can only be presented over an interval of time. Appearing to take the latter for granted, he argues against the former. An approximation of this argument can be presented in two premises towards a conclusion, let’s call this the argument from perceptible motion.<sup>7</sup>

- P1)** We perceptually experience motion and change (this being phenomenologically supported);
- P2)** Motion can only be presented over an interval (this seemingly being taken as self-evident), and so an interval must be presented in experience if we are to experience motion;
- C)** Therefore an interval is presented in experience.

In this context he says that “[o]ne must renounce either one or the other: the direct perception of time or the momentariness of consciousness” (*ibid.*, 321). A theorist who endorses the momentariness of consciousness – who denies that a brief duration is presented in perceptual experience – must deny that we can perceive continuous motion/change. That is, they must reject premise 1. Stern takes such a denial to be unacceptable, given the phenomenological evidence a subject can introspect in favour of the claim that she perceptually experiences motion (premise 1). Stern’s proposed solution is to reject the claim of the momentariness of consciousness.

It is possible to also read this form of argument in Broad (1923), who is equally concerned with the distinction between perceptible and imperceptible motion. Broad says that “...it is a notorious fact that we do not merely notice that something *has* moved or otherwise changed; we also often see something *moving* or *changing*... It is also clear that to see a second-hand *moving* is a quite different thing from ‘seeing’ that an hour-hand *has* moved.” (1923, 351; *emphasis in original*). The specious present is said to be that interval of time over which an object must move a discriminable distance in order to be seen as moving – to give rise to this ingredient of the perceptual phenomenology. If an object does not move a discriminable distance over this interval it will not be seen as moving. If it is nevertheless moving, albeit slowly, the subject will only later be able to infer that it has moved. (This way of motivating an appeal to the specious present can, for example, also be read in Grush [2007, 29], Hoerl [2013, 394], Moore [1953, 188], and Russell [1927, 205].) In this context, the idea that something of some limited temporal extent is presented in experience comes as the conclusion of a line of reasoning about the perceptual experience of motion/change, which is itself

to be supported by reflection on the phenomenology. Indeed, some theorists have suggested that this line of argument is the sole motivation for an appeal to the specious present (see, for example, Arstila [2018, esp. 288–290 and 297]).

An interesting result of motivating an appeal to the specious present in this way is that it leads some theorists to suggest that it may be modality-specific. If we begin with the claims that we can see, hear, and feel motion/change (to be contrasted with those cases in which it is only inferred), then it may be thought that the interval over which some stimuli must change a discriminable amount in order to be experienced as changing could well vary from one sensory modality to another. This possibility is explicitly entertained by Barry Dainton – in a supplementary document concerning the specious present to his *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* entry on ‘Temporal Consciousness’ – where he suggests that it would be wrong to assume that the specious presents of different sense modalities (and of different subjects) are of exactly the same extent (Dainton, 2016). Theorists might suppose that the auditory, visual, and tactual temporal measures would be more or less similar intervals, but Dainton warns that this is something that we should not automatically assume.

## ***2. 2. Accounting for temporal limits on awareness***

From James’ discussion we can bring out an alternative way of motivating an appeal to the specious present, based upon a phenomenological claim about what we seem to be confronted with when we reflect on our ongoing experience: that it seems to be of some limited, but positively extended, interval. This claim is of interest when one sets out to articulate the phenomenal character of experience quite generally. Making the assumption – that is common among many philosophers (and perhaps implicitly held by those outside the profession too) – that conscious experience has a phenomenal character which is manifest to an experiencing subject when she undergoes the experience, James can be read as saying that in an effort to articulate what it is that is manifest to us we must appeal to something of some interval.

That an interval is presented in experience is to be motivated through reflection on what it is like to experience temporally extended phenomena, rather than coming as the entailment of a line of reasoning concerning perceptible motion. Reflecting on what it is like for a subject experiencing a temporally extended occurrence – such as listening to a piece of music or watching a rolling ball down a hill – it is suggested that there is a sense in which she seems to be perceptually aware of

some limited but non-zero temporal extent. Such an appeal to the specious present is suggested in the writing of two authors who appeared to shape James' thoughts on the perception of time, Kelly and Hodgson.

While James takes the terminology of 'the specious present' from Kelly, his chapter on the perception of time draws significant influence from Hodgson's discussion of experience and time, evidenced in part by the number of quotes from Hodgson included in James' discussion.<sup>8</sup> Hodgson certainly appears to take reflection upon one's experience to support the claim that experience presents some positive temporal extent, saying: "...whatever we are actually experiencing is always the content of a present moment of experience, which may be called the empirical present, in order to distinguish it from an abstract mathematical moment of time... We have no actual experience which is not included in the content of the empirical present moment..." (Hodgson 1898, 35). Operating with a phenomenologically driven methodology – in some ways a precursor to the methodology better known from the writing of Husserl<sup>9</sup> – Hodgson suggests that the *empirical* present moment is all that is available for analysis, and that this moment, which is presented in experience, is of some positive temporal extent. This can also be read in how Hodgson says: "The lowest conceivable empirical moment of experience contains both time and feeling, and the lowest empirical moment in experience as it actually comes to us contains both sequence in time and difference in feeling" (Hodgson 1898, 64–5). Such claims about the time presented in experience are taken up by James in his discussion of the specious present.

Both Kelly and James make claims about the minimum temporal extent an experiencing subject is aware of in reflection upon her experience, and a maximal temporal extent. Regarding the former James claims, like Hodgson, that the mathematical present is an ideal abstraction which is not realized in sense. The appeal to a temporal extent presented in experience can here be supported by how a typical subject cannot, in introspection upon what is presented in her experience, discern below a certain positive duration in isolation.<sup>10</sup> This is not to deny that there is something it is like for a subject at a time; rather, it is to maintain that there is only something it is like at that time in virtue of what it is like over that time.

In bringing out the sense in which there is an upper temporal limit to what is given in ongoing experience, James appeals to Kelly and his example of a bar of music (quoted previously). The point to draw out for present interest is simply the idea that what is presented in ongoing experience seems to be of some limited temporal spread; that all the notes of a bar of a song seem

to be contained in the present, but that all of the notes of the song (which is of a greater temporal extent) do not. What a subject is aware of in perception, what is presented in perceptual experience, is in this way temporally limited. This limited interval of time, given in experience as falling between the past and future, is what the specious present picks out. Making what appears to be much the same claim, some philosophers – for example, Soteriou (2013), Phillips (2013), and Richardson (2014) – have suggested that the notion of a temporal sensory field has application. This is taken to be “...an invariant structural feature of conscious perceptual awareness”; an interval of time that figures in experience and within which things can be sensed (Soteriou 2013, 130).

To be clear, in appealing to the Jamesian notion of the specious present, the claim is not that an interval of time is an additional object of experience; nor is it the claim that we can be aware of the boundaries of this interval in just the same way as we can be aware of the boundaries of the visual field in the visuo-spatial case (though this is not to deny that there are some analogies between the two cases). The claim is that, in reflection upon one’s experience, the subject can become aware of upper and lower temporal limits on what she is perceptually aware of at any given moment – though she need not be able to provide any particularly precise estimates of the boundaries of what she is so perceptually aware of. *This* is what motivates an appeal to the Jamesian notion.

For a more concrete illustration, consider the following example from Kelly: “There you are at the opera house. The soprano has just hit her high note – a glass-shattering high C that fills the hall – and she holds it. She holds the note for such a long time that after a while a funny thing happens: you no longer seem only to hear it, ... In addition, you also seem to hear something more. It is difficult to express precisely what this extra feature is. One is tempted to say, however, that the note now sounds like it has been going on for a very long time.” (Kelly 2005, 208). I don’t wish to hang too much weight on Kelly’s wider discussion or description of this case, but a couple of points are important to note.

It is plausible that we can hear something, such as a glass-shattering high C, which does not seem to change over time (not in volume, pitch, or timbre). We characteristically also hear this high C as filling time. To explain this second claim: as we hear the high C being held over time the object of experience does not seem to be instantaneous, but rather it seems to have temporal extension. And, as Kelly describes the case, the subject is aware of a temporally extended object of experience – the holding of the high C – as temporally extended over an interval of time which is longer than

that which the subject is currently perceptually aware of. In Kelly's terms, it sounds like it has been going on for a very long time. This reveals upper and lower limits to our temporal awareness. In attending to the high C being held by the soprano, the subject is only aware of any instantaneous part of the object of experience in virtue of being aware of some part that has temporal extension; the subject is also typically aware of the holding of the high C, as it comes to an end, as something with earlier temporal parts that outstrip the temporal extent of what the subject is currently perceptually aware of. This demonstrates the Jamesian motivation for thinking that an interval of time shows up in experience, where this doesn't depend upon reflection on perceived movement and change.

To summarise, an appeal to the specious present can be read in James (1890) – in addition to Hodgson and Kelly, quoted previously – where it is motivated independently of the wish to explain the possibility of perceiving motion. There may be some debate over whether the experience of change is a necessary feature of experience whenever it occurs (and theorists may point out that even in complete darkness and silence, there will typically be proprioceptive awareness of one's breathing in addition to the occurrence of various mental activities, such as inner speech). Here I simply note that an appeal to the experience of change is not necessary to motivate the Jamesian specious present. That a subject is presented with a limited interval in experience is a claim that may be motivated by reflection on how things are experienced as filling or otherwise falling within time; I call this the Jamesian motivation. Yet such a claim may also be motivated by a wish to account for some other feature of the phenomenology, such as perceptible motion; I call this the Sternian motivation.

### **3. On the appeal to the specious present**

#### **3.1. *On what follows from the Sternian motivation***

As previously indicated, many theorists have supposed that it follows from the very ability to perceive motion and change that a brief duration must be presented in ongoing experience. Yet this supposed entailment can be challenged. Prosser (2016) has recently presented an attack on the idea that the phenomenology associated with the experience of motion/change entails that our experience does present a temporally extended interval. The alternative view Prosser proposes – though does not unequivocally endorse – is a dynamic snapshot model of temporal experience.

The snapshot model of temporal experience is a minority view in current debates,<sup>11</sup> on which an experience is said to lack any significant temporal extension, and the only temporal relation that can be presented in perceptual experience is that of simultaneity. (At least, the relation of before/after cannot be presented in a snapshot, though for Arstila [2018], Le Poidevin [2007], and Prosser [2016], motion and change may be.) Such models are often illustrated through an analogy with cinematic depiction, where a movie is presented through a rapid sequence of snapshots being presented. On these models of temporal experience theorists either seek to explain why it is so natural for us to claim that we perceive occurrences unfolding over time, such as change and succession, when in actual fact we do not (as we are, at a time, only perceptually presented with a snapshot of some state of affairs); or else they seek to explain how a sequence of such snapshots can account for our perceptual experience of phenomena such as change and succession. Prosser takes the latter line; hence the view being called a *dynamic* snapshot model.

My intention is not to engage with Prosser's proposal here – see Shardlow (2019) for this – I merely mean to demonstrate how Prosser's reasoning can allow one to halt the Sternian argument from perceptible motion. Prosser does not wish to deny that we experience motion/change. He highlights that we only have to hold that experience presents an interval in order to account for the perceptual experience of motion/change if we make the assumption that in presenting a punctate state of affairs the state of affairs must also be presented as static. Prosser objects that this is simply to assume that “[a]n instantaneous content cannot include anything that can only be detected over a non-instantaneous interval”, but in making such an assumption one “conflates the properties of the stimulus that are necessary for motion detection with the content of the resulting experience” (Prosser 2016, 121–2). In the context of the argument from perceptible motion (§2.1), Prosser rejects the second premise – that an interval must be presented in experience if we are to be able to experience motion/change. Drawing the distinction between the properties of the stimulus that are necessary in order for our perceptual mechanisms to detect motion and that which is subsequently presented in perceptual experience, Prosser says that one can maintain that a momentary state of affairs can be presented as dynamic.

In what he takes to be a probative analogy, Prosser appeals to how we define instantaneous rates of change when talking about the velocity of moving bodies. In this case an object may need to be moving for some period of time if it is to be moving at all, but its velocity can be represented by an instantaneous vector rate of change. In a similar vein, Prosser grants that a stimulus might need to be moving for some period of time in order for a subject's perceptual mechanisms to detect

that the object is in motion, but he suggests that in this case there could also be a representation of motion at an instant. Prosser can be read as making a claim about the environmental conditions – i.e. for motion to be detected, the moving object has to fill in some temporal interval and change its location by a sufficient amount over such an interval – or about a constraint on perceptual processing – i.e. for a perceptual system to be sensitive to motion, there is a temporal interval over which the system tracks the moving object so as to track changes of location within that interval. Whichever Prosser has in mind, he can be read as arguing that it does not follow from the fact that we perceive motion that we must thereby enjoy an experience which presents an extended interval (and which presents a discriminable change in location of the moving object over such an interval).

Prosser sketches a proposal on which theorists can explain how it is possible to perceive motion without thereby holding that a temporally extended interval is presented in experience. Within the context of accounting for the phenomenology of experienced motion/change, there appears to be a position in logical space where one can accept that there is a role for an explanatorily relevant interval of time without accepting that this interval is presented in experience. In this sense the Sternian motivation can be satisfied without necessitating an appeal to the specious present (though we may debate whether a specious present model or a dynamic snapshot model is better motivated).

### ***3. 2. On what follows from the Jamesian motivation***

A theorist may maintain that reflecting upon what it is like to experience temporally extended occurrences reveals that such occurrences are perceived as filling and/or otherwise falling within some temporal extent. This can be compared with how a typical subject visually perceives spatially extended objects filling and/or otherwise falling within some spatial extent. Given the independent Jamesian motivation for holding that an interval is presented in perceptual experience, what one says about the specious present may then have implications for what one says about perceptible motion. Given the claim that an interval is presented in experience, it is plausible that in order to experience motion/change a discriminable amount of motion/change must be presented over this interval (consider the contrast with inferred motion once again). To demonstrate that this is so, consider the visuospatial analogy.

In visual experience the objects of sight are presented within a spatial region which extends outwards from the subject's position in space, where appeal to this spatial region is typically construed as an appeal to the (spatial) visual field. Of the spatial phenomena that we can experience, one is variation in colour over the spatial parts of an object. Yet, an appeal to the visual field is motivated independently of an account of how a subject comes to visually experience variation in colour over a given spatial extent.

We could imagine theorists debating whether or not an experiencing subject must have a visual field of some spatial extent – whether it need extend along three axes, two, or merely one – in order to visually experience such variation in colour. Regardless of such a debate, given that we are independently motivated to endorse the claim that typical subjects *do* have a visual field of some spatial extent, we can ask about the implications that this carries for the visual experience of variation in colour over the spatial parts of a given object. To experience such variation in colour it is not enough for a subject to experience one shade of colour at one location at one time, supposing this colour fills her visual field, and then to experience another (shade of) colour at a different location at a later time, say once the subject turns her head, again supposing that the second colour fills her visual field. This would be to experience different shades of colour at different locations at different times.

In order to experience variation in colour over the spatial parts of an object, there needs to be some discriminable variation presented within the visual field.<sup>12</sup> Irrespective of whether the visual experience of variation in colour across the spatial parts of an object entails that an experiencing subject has a visual field of some spatial extent, that a subject does have a visual field of some spatial extent carries certain implications for the visual experience of variation: that there must be a discriminable variation in colour over, or within, the spatial extent of the visual field in order for the subject to visually experience variation.

Given the independent Jamesian motivation for appealing to the specious present, analogous considerations to those raised concerning the visual experience of variation in colour across space apply in the case of motion/change over time. To experience motion/change it is not enough for a subject to experience an object occupying a given location or displaying a given property at one time – over the interval of the specious present – and then to experience it occupying a distinct location or displaying a different property at a later time – over a distinct interval, the length of the specious present. Endorsing the specious present entails that there must be a discriminable

movement/change over the temporal extent of the specious present in order for there to be the experience of motion/change. Once we endorse the Jamesian notion of the specious present, there are certain clear cases in which it can play such an explanatory role.

The above reasoning has some clear implications for current debates regarding the specious present. It does not follow from the claim that we perceive motion and change that we are perceptually presented with something of some positively extended interval. If theorists appeal to perceptible motion in an attempt to motivate an appeal to the specious present, this line of argument can be blocked – or is, at least, in need of further support for the second premise of the argument from perceptible motion – as Prosser demonstrates. Yet, granting that we are independently motivated to appeal to the specious present, it does follow that this can play an explanatory role in certain clear cases. In order to experience motion/change there needs to be some discriminable movement/change presented over the specious present. It may be that where a point of contention in recent debates has often been whether an interval must be presented in experience in order for a subject to experience motion/change, this would be best replaced with the arguably more basic question of whether reflection on the phenomenal character of experience supports the claim that an interval is presented in experience. (It should be clear from §2.2 that I would answer in the affirmative.)

#### **4. Between perception and memory**

One way in which theorists have tried to cast the role of the Jamesian motivation (in an appeal to the specious present) in a sceptical light has been through suggesting that it rests on a fallacious way of thinking about experience. An example of this comes from Dennett's (1991, 1992) attack on what he calls the idea of the 'Cartesian Theatre' of mind. Part of the idea of such a Cartesian Theatre model is that experience is something like an internal picture, or video recording, that is presented to the experiencing subject (or to the homunculus). Dennett has much to say against such a model and I do not attempt to provide a detailed discussion here. Of particular relevance is Dennett's suggestion that the boundary between what we refer to as perception and some form of short term memory "is not perfectly sharp" (Dennett and Kinsbourne 1992, 192).<sup>13</sup>

In warning against a Cartesian Theatre conception of experience, Dennett warns against a conception on which the question 'what is currently appearing on the stage of your consciousness?'

always has a fully precise and determinate answer – an answer determined by the experiential contents present in the relevant subject’s consciousness. This is where Dennett’s warning extends to the distinction between perception and short-term memory. Dennett appears to be sceptical of any view on which there is a principled distinction between what is said to be currently perceived and what is said to be the content of a short-term memory. This may cast in a sceptical light the idea that there is a moment at which we can say that an object slips from perceptual experience to memory, and so casts in a sceptical light the idea that there is a principled notion of the Jamesian specious present.

To be clear, many theorists influenced by Dennett nonetheless take reflection on the phenomenal character of experience to be, in general, possible, without thereby committing one to a Cartesian Theatre model of experience. Yet it is said that in the case of the specious present there nonetheless remains serious problems. Those influenced by the discussion of Dennett and Kinsbourne take one problem to concern whether such reflection upon experience allows a subject to distinguish between a view on which she is perceptually presented with some temporal extent – the specious present – and a view on which she is presented with something akin to a momentary experience, in addition to having a short term memory (or retention). If we are not able to draw such a distinction, it may be thought that the Jamesian motivation is problematic and such reflection on the phenomenology cannot support an appeal to the specious present (such a worry can be read in Prosser 2016, 131–3; Roselli 2018, 127–130).<sup>14</sup> For example, while Prosser allows that an appeal to a momentary experience and a short term memory in order to account for the phenomenology in cases of experienced motion is implausible (at least without more being said about what can be presented in a momentary experience), he suggests that it is less clear that such an explanation cannot be applied to other cases, such as experiences of discontinuous change (Prosser 2016, 132).

In general, there appears to be scepticism over whether an appeal to reflection on the phenomenology can motivate an appeal to the specious present – or more generally, an interval being presented in experience – without doing so through cases of continuous change and motion. This, it may be argued, is why the debate has shifted towards the possibility of the perception of change, as this is taken to be a case in which reflection on the phenomenology is possible, there being a phenomenological contrast between cases of perceptible and imperceptible motion. Though the two are distinct, it is not clear that scepticism about the role that reflection on the phenomenology can play is any more justified in the case of the Jamesian than the Sternian project.

To demonstrate how such scepticism can also rear its head in the case of the Sternian project, consider the following. We can, minimally, make a phenomenological claim about a subject's awareness of motion, as opposed to an awareness that something has moved (this is demonstrated in the discussion of Broad, above). If, following Dennett, a theorist is sceptical about how to draw a boundary between perception and memory, she might also be sceptical of the claim that motion is, strictly speaking, *perceived*. She may allow that there is a phenomenology of motion, to be distinguished from the contrast class of inferred motion. But given the scepticism we are currently entertaining, why say that the phenomenology is to be accounted for in terms of *perceived* motion, as opposed to motion being experienced through some combination of momentary perception and some form of short term memory (which can nonetheless be distinguished from inferred motion)?

In the context of such a question, we can consider Thomas Reid. For Reid, we can be aware motion and succession, but strictly speaking this is not perceptual. In saying that it is not perceptual, Reid does not appear to be making a phenomenological claim – he does not appear to be denying that there is a distinction to be drawn, from reflection on the phenomenology, between motion as it is experienced and motion as it is inferred *but not experienced*. Rather, his position is a result of theoretical constraints he takes to apply to what can count as perceptual (see Reid 1785, 326–7; Falkenstein 2017, 48–49).

If we push the scepticism concerning the boundary between perception and some form of short term memory, it appears that we can express scepticism over whether a temporal extent is presented in perceptual experience *and* we can express scepticism over whether motion is perceived. In the former case, a theorist might say that although a subject is not aware of an instant in isolation, it is not incoherent to hold the she is perceptually presented with an instant while also having a short term memory (or retention). That the subject is minimally aware of the moment presented in perception *together* with a short term memory is then taken to explain why the subject is not aware of an instant in isolation. Likewise, in the case of motion, a theorist might say that there is a distinctive phenomenology of motion, what we typically refer to as *perceived* motion, while maintaining a view on which – as a result of other theoretical concerns, that would need to be specified – this feature of the phenomenology is not, strictly speaking, perceptual (as opposed to being 'experiential' more generally). In either case, such scepticism could lead a theorist to hold a view on which she need not appeal to the specious present.

We might reasonably question what motivation such a theorist has for denying the claim that we are *perceptually* presented with some temporal extent, and similarly we might question what motivation she has for denying that we do *perceive* motion. I am certainly sympathetic with the force of such questions. But what I mean to stress is that both cases are on an even keel. Whether theorists are concerned with a subject's experiential awareness of motion, or lower temporal limits on what a subject can be experientially aware of in isolation, we may wonder what the motivation is for denying that some temporal extent – to be called the specious present – is presented in perceptual experience. If a theorist is inclined to be sceptical regarding whether reflection on the phenomenology supports the claim that a temporal extent is presented in perceptual experience, she should also be sceptical about whether reflection on the phenomenology supports the claim that motion is, strictly speaking, perceived. I do not wish to support such scepticism; I wish to demonstrate that the Sternian and the Jamesian projects are equally worthy of discussion.

### **Concluding Remarks**

This paper began with two phenomenological claims. Firstly, a subject perceptually experiences motion/change; secondly, what she is aware of in perception, what is presented in her perceptual experience, is of a positive but limited temporal extent. With reference to the writing of James and Stern, I demonstrated how each phenomenological claim has been taken to motivate an appeal to the specious present.

The main aim throughout the present discussion has been to elucidate the notion of the specious present and to explain and distinguish between two ways in which we can think of the link between perceptible motion and the specious present. I argued that contemporary and historical theorists frequently appeal to the specious present with two different motivations. Firstly, an appeal to the specious present can be motivated by reflection on lower and upper temporal limits upon what a subject is aware of in introspection upon the perceptual phenomenology. This is what I referred to as the Jamesian motivation. Secondly, an appeal to the specious present can be motivated by the argument from perceptible motion – this is what I referred to as the Sternian motivation – though in this context more needs to be done to support a crucial premise of the argument. It is important to recognise that there are two such motivations – and two related ways of construing the link between perceptible motion and the specious present – when we consider arguments for and against the claim that there is a specious present.

I have granted that it may be possible to satisfy the Sternian motivation – the phenomenological contrast between experienced and merely inferred motion – without invoking the specious present. I have also demonstrated that once a theorist appeals to the specious present, on the basis of the Jamesian motivation (for example), it can play a clear explanatory role in certain cases of experienced motion/change, thereby satisfying the Sternian motivation. Finally, I argued that while scepticism regarding where to draw the contrast between perception and memory may lead some theorists to be sceptical over whether a temporal extent is presented in *perceptual* experience, such scepticism could also lead to scepticism over whether motion/change is, strictly speaking, *perceived*. I do not support such scepticism, but insofar as there is a concern here it applies equally to each motivation.

## Notes

1. I will mostly drop the prefix of ‘perceptual’, but there is no philosophical significance behind doing so, throughout my focus will remain on perceptual experience, except when I explicitly state otherwise. (This is not to say that the arguments presented could not, in some cases, be extended to all phenomenally conscious occurrences.) I will also use the term ‘present’ so as to be neutral between various accounts of the nature of perceptual experience. I take it that saying experience ‘presents’  $x$  could be read as experience ‘presents through a relation of acquaintance’, ‘presents through a relation to sense data’, or ‘presents through representation’.
2. Advocates of such accounts appear to include Dainton (2001, 2006, 2008, 2014); Foster (1979, 1982, 1991); Hoerl (2013); Phillips (2010, 2011, 2014a, 2014b); Rashbrook (2013); Russell (1992); and Soteriou (2010).
3. Advocates of such accounts appear to include Almäng (2014); Grush (2007); Kiverstein (2010); and Lee (2014a, 2014b, 2014c).
4. For Kelly’s characterisation, see the quote James attributes to ‘Clay’ (James 1890, 406). On the confusion around Kelly being given the pseudonym ‘Clay’, see Andersen and Grush (2009) and Andersen (2014).
5. His notion of presence-time may be broadly similar to the specious present, but this is not to say that they are identical (depending on how one characterises the specious present). Stern appeals to presence-time as the stretch of time over which a mental act can be extended, but he comments that this is not identical with the time during which a presentation persists (in this latter case he appeals to ‘primary memory’). He only discusses the term ‘specious present’ in a footnote (see Stern 1897, 325, footnote 15).
6. See Andersen and Grush (2009) and Andersen (2017) for the suggestion that James and Kelly did have the very possibility of the perception of motion (partly) motivating their appeal to the specious present. Also see Andersen and Grush (2009) for a discussion of the genesis of these ideas in writers prior to James and Kelly; in particular Hodgson (1878, 1898).
7. See Shardlow (2019) for a greater discussion of this line of argument.
8. I cannot do justice to what Hodgson has to say about the relationship between experience and time in the current context. See Andersen (2017) for a discussion of how Hodgson’s writing relates to current debates

- regarding temporal experience; see Mander (2014) for a detailed account of Hodgson's philosophical position as set out in his *The Metaphysic of Experience* (1898).
9. Spicker (1973) offers a detailed comparison of the writing of Husserl and Hodgson, noting how much of Hodgson's work anticipates ideas taken up by Husserl.
  10. For greater discussion of this point, see Phillips (2011), Shardlow (2019), and Soteriou (2013, ch.4).
  11. But it does have its advocates. For example, see the models discussed by Arstila (2018), Chuard (2011, 2017), and Le Poidevin (2007).
  12. There may be further complications. It may be that we have to take into account what is presented in the visual field over the interval of the specious present. To illustrate this thought, suppose that a subject is moving at a continuous rate perpendicular to an object (such as a wall) which varies in colour very gradually, keeping her gaze straight ahead at whatever portion of the object is perpendicular to her. It may be that if the subject remained stationary and looked at the object from a given location, she would not be able to visually discriminate any variation in colour (given the portion of the object which falls within her visual field). However, given that she is in continuous motion and the portion of the object she is visually aware of is changing it may be that she is able to visually discriminate some variation in colour as a result of what is presented in the visual field over the specious present. For simplicity I leave this complication aside when presenting the case in the text.
  13. Dennett also suggests that the time represented in experience and the time of representing may come apart at short timescales (Dennett 1991, 161). On this claim, see Phillips (2014a, 145–7), where it is argued – contra Dennett – that some features of the temporal structure of experience and the temporal structure of its objects must match.
  14. Note that appeal to the specious present does not preclude one from holding that the temporal interval so presented is constituted, in part, by some form of short term memory (or retention); where this is to be distinguished from the role played by episodic or semantic recall, which can allow a subject to become aware that something has moved/changed. Such a model of the specious present is often explicitly endorsed, referred to as a retentional account (see footnote 4). Though it is to be granted that the main aim of Prosser and Roselli in this context is to call into question how substantial the apparent differences are between supposedly competing models of the specious present (and temporal experience more generally).

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