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# Hyper-Russellian Skepticism

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**Abstract:** The hyper-Russellian skeptic is someone who thinks that only one of all your experiences was, is, and will ever be conscious. Which one? The very one you are having now. Before you were always a zombie, and you will be a zombie for ever after. In the present literature on the metaphysics of passage of time, there is disagreement on whether our feeling that time passes — the “dynamic flavor” of our ordinary experience — provides support to the A-theory, that is, the thesis that the passage of time is an objective feature of reality. Lately, several philosophers have argued against this idea. In this paper I want to push this line of reasoning further by exploiting the hyper-Russellian scenario against the A-theory of time.

**Keywords:** A-theory, temporal, experience, consciousness, skepticism

## Introduction: A-theory, B-theory and Closeness to Common Sense

The A-theory of time (i. e., the common core of the various A-theoretic approaches to time) takes the passage of time to be an objective, mind-independent feature of reality. It is usually construed as a form of tense realism: past, present and future are genuine distinctions in reality, and as the present “moves along”, its privileged metaphysical status shines on the successive parts of reality.<sup>1</sup> The B-theory of time (i. e., the common core of the various B-theoretic approaches to time) takes the passage of time to be illusory. According to the view, the present has no privilege, and tenses are merely indexical devices for talking about positions in the temporal series from an (as it were) internal standpoint.

The A-theory is considered to be the metaphysical view that is closest to the pre-theoretical stance of common sense. This seems correct. The central tenet of

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<sup>1</sup> What parts of reality exist along the temporal dimension, whether only the present exists or also the past and the future, is a further matter of debate. In this paper, I am assuming that existence is not confined in the present. See the end of the next section.

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the A-theory, namely that the present is ever changing, has the flavor of a commonsense platitude. In comparison, the B-theoretic view of the distinction between the past, the present and the future as being a “perspectival” effect of our position in a tenseless series of events — true as it may turn out to be — is far removed from our naive thinking, if not entirely counterintuitive.

Closeness to common sense is considered by many to be a *pro tanto* reason for preferring a particular position over its rival(s). In what follows, I will endorse such a “Moorean” take on metaphysics, and comply with the principle that the less they diverge from common sense, the more virtuous our theories are. However, there is a certain amount of vagueness in the very idea of what ‘closeness to common sense’ actually means, and at least with respect to certain ways of construing the expression, the claim that the A-theory is closer to common sense may be doubted. For instance, it has been argued that if we assume the A-theory we are *not* in a better position to explain the dynamic character of ordinary experience,<sup>2</sup> and that a correct account of the phenomenology of the experience of passage does not presuppose that the A-theory is true and the B-theory is false.<sup>3</sup> But even if the A-theorist cannot exploit features of *experience* to provide abductive evidence for her position, she can still appeal to the similarity or closeness between the central tenets of the A-theory and the *naive narrative* that we provide in reconstructing how reality seems to us in its temporal aspects. In this (perhaps minimal) sense, I take it to be uncontroversial that the A-theory is ‘closer to common sense’ than the B-theory.<sup>4</sup> Yet, even if we don’t confuse conservativeness with respect to common sense with an abductive advantage of the A-theory (namely the claim that the A-theory would allow us to account better for our experience of the passage of time), there are reasons to doubt whether the A-theory is actually supported by common sense — or at least that is the central tenet that I defend in this paper.

In the next sections, I will first present an argument in favor of the A-theorist based on the “Moorean principle” that closeness to common sense (in the aforementioned sense) is a theoretical virtue (§ 2). Then I will argue against its

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<sup>2</sup> See Prosser (2013), and Paul (2010).

<sup>3</sup> See Traynor (2014), and Almäng (2014). I defend an account of temporal phenomenology that is compatible with the B-theory in Torrenco (2017a).

<sup>4</sup> Deng (2013), Phillips (2014), and Hoerl (2014) also focus on the “folk” explanation of temporal experience rather than on its (alleged) specific phenomenal character. None of them seem to consider such a closeness to common sense to be a theoretical advantage of the A-theory — although each for a different reason. I am wholly sympathetic to their stance, but in what follows I would grant to the A-theorist that closeness to the way we ordinarily talk and think about time and temporal experience is a theoretical advantage (with a proviso that will become apparent in what follows).

conclusion; roughly, my reasoning will be based on the assumption that the reason why more conservative theories with respect to our pre-theoretical intuitions and narrative should be preferred to more exotic ones — all things being equal — is that more conservative theories are better placed to withstand skepticism about (relevant) commonsense truisms (§ 3). To make my point, I discuss what I call Russellian Skepticism (§ 4) and the problem of the epistemic privilege of the present (§ 5). These discussions will allow me to articulate an argument against the alleged closeness of the A-theory to common sense based on what I call Hyper-Russellian skepticism (§ 6).

## A Moorean Argument for the A-theory

The “Moorean Principle” on which an A-theorist can base her argument leading to the conclusion that common sense supports the A-theory over the B-theory can be formulated as follows:

**(MP)** If it is part of the commonsense narrative about reality and our experience of it that  $p$ , then a metaphysical theory  $M$  that entails that  $p$  is to be preferred to rival views (i.e., views that don’t entail that  $p$ ), unless the costs of endorsing  $M$  are higher than those of endorsing rival views.

By exploiting (MP), it is easy to construct a straightforward argument in favor of the A-theory. Here it is:

- (1) It is part of the commonsense narrative about reality and our experience of it that time “really” passes [Ass.]
- (2) The costs of the A-theory are not higher than those of rival views [Ass.]
- (3) The A-theory entails that time “really” passes [Ass.]
- (4) Therefore, the A-theory is to be preferred to rival views [1, 2, 3, MP]

My aim is to argue against assumption (2). However, I am not claiming here that the A-theory fares worse with respect to either scientific theories, or McTaggart’s paradox, or in any other aspect unconnected to its being closer to our naive way of thinking about the passage of time. Quite the contrary, I am *assuming* here, for the sake of argument, that bracketing the issue of closeness to common sense, the A-theory and the B-theory are *equally theoretically virtuous*. Such an

assumption is a very friendly concession to my adversary. One of the striking consequences of it is that, in order to attach (2), I will have to argue that the A-theory has some additional costs — namely costs that the B-theory does not have — *as far as the issue of closeness to common sense is concerned*.

My argument, though, will be limited in scope and will be focused against only non-presentist forms of A-theory. In general, although all A-theories encompass the thesis that the present is in some sense privileged, they may differ in their ontology. Consider the different ways in which the privilege of the present can be construed. Presentists take the privilege to be *existence*: only the part of reality that is present exists. Non-presentist A-theorists take the privilege of the present to be something else — typically, eternalist A-theorists (a.k.a. “spotlight” theorists) consider it to be a primitive metaphysical status, and “growing-blockers” construe it as the topological feature of being the latest layer of reality. In this paper I will be concerned *only* with non-presentist versions of the A-theory. This is an unfriendly assumption for an A-theorist, if you wish, but I take presentism to be plagued with independent problems in any case, and so if by endorsing a presentist ontology the A-theorist can escape my argument, so be it. I am happy here to debate only with non-presentist A-theorists. As even a brief overview of the current literature shows, I am not targeting a straw-man.<sup>5</sup>

## The Moorean and the Skeptic

As I said, I doubt that assumption (2) in the argument in the session above is true, even granting that A-theory and B-theory are equally virtuous with respect to any issue unconnected to closeness to common sense. This means that the Moorean Principle MP could not be appealed to for a successful argument in favor of the A-theory. In general, MP is justified in so far as the metaphysical theory M to which it applies does not fare worse than its rivals in withstanding “relevant” skeptical hypotheses, that is, skeptical hypotheses about common-sense truisms concerning the topic of M. By ‘withstanding’ here I do not mean to *provide evidence* against the skeptics. What I mean is that a metaphysical theory

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<sup>5</sup> See, for example, among the philosophers who defend non-presentist versions of the A-theory, Forrest (2006), Skow (2009) (but Skow 2015 defends a form of B-theory), Sullivan (2012), Cameron (2015) and Deasy (2015). I give an argument against the thesis that presentism is close to common sense in Torrenco (2017b).

M1 fares worse in withstanding a skeptical hypothesis concerning thesis  $p$  than a theory M2, if M1 requires more additional premises than M2 to entail  $p$ .<sup>6</sup>

To clarify the point, consider a philosopher who exploits MP in order to argue that the metaphysical thesis of realism about material objects (i. e., the thesis that there exist ordinary, middle size, material objects) is true in the following argument:

- (1) It is part of the commonsense narrative about reality and our experience of it that there exist material objects [Ass.]
- (2') The costs of endorsing realism about material objects are not higher than those of endorsing rival views [Ass.]
- (3') Realism about material objects entails that there exist material objects [Ass.]
- (4') Therefore, realism about material objects is to be preferred to rival positions  
[1', 2', 3', MP]

Now, granting that realism with respect to material objects and its rival hypotheses are equally virtuous when it comes to compatibility with scientific theories and other matters unrelated to common sense considerations, we are justified in using MP to argue in favor of realism about material objects, in so far realism about material objects does *not* fare worse with respect to rival hypotheses in ruling out the claim that commonsense truisms about material objects — such as that material objects can be touched, seen, etc. — are false. If a realist about material objects needed to make more costly hypotheses about reality in order to explain how material objects can be touched than an anti-realist, then its closeness to common sense would be illusory — in the sense that it should not count as a theoretical virtue of the position. That is a simple consequence of the fact that if realism about material objects has to assume more than anti-realism in order to rule out skepticism with respect to truisms about material objects, then premise (2') would be *per force* false.

With respect to the example of realism about material objects, I doubt that an anti-realist could counter an argument like the one above by appealing to the

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<sup>6</sup> Of course, one has to weigh the theoretical costs of each premiss rather than count them, for instance, by taking into account their complexity. But, as we shall see, this complication does not affect my argument, so I stick to the simplified version of the claim in what follows.

greater difficulty the realist would face in withstanding a skeptic about the possibility of touching material objects (say). Regardless of the details, it is very unlikely that a realist account of any truism — such as that material objects can be touched — ends up being more costly than the anti-realist's. However, is the situation for an A-theorist different? I think it is, because there is at least one skeptical hypothesis, which concerns a commonsense truism connected with the passage of time, that forces the A-theorist to endorse *more* than a B-theorist in order to withstand it. Consider the following two truisms about the passage of time: (i) yesterday you existed; (ii) yesterday you were conscious. The first is doubted by the Russellian skeptic, the second by the Hyper-Russellian skeptic. While the A-theorist and the B-theorist will expend the same theoretical cost to withstand the first form of skepticism, the A-theorist has to expend more to withstand the second one — or so I will argue in the rest of the paper.

## The Russellian Skeptic

In the *Analysis of Mind*, when he talks about memory as a putative source of knowledge, Russell says:

There is no logical impossibility in the hypothesis that the world sprang into being five minutes ago, exactly as it then was, with a population that “remembered” a wholly unreal past. There is no logically necessary connection between events at different times; therefore nothing that is happening now or will happen in the future can disprove the hypothesis that the world began five minutes ago. Hence the occurrences which are *called* knowledge of the past are logically independent of the past; they are wholly analysable into present contents, which might, theoretically, be just what they are even if no past had existed. (Russell 1921)

Let us call a “Russellian” skeptic someone who doubts the existence of that part of the past that reaches farther back in time than five minutes ago. According to the Russellian skeptic's hypothesis, the world as we experience it, with all our memories and external traces of the past, popped into existence just a few minutes ago. Such a hypothesis is compatible with all the present evidence that we have, but not with the thesis that I will call *realism about the past*. A realist about the past takes the world to have existed for as long as the ordinary (and scientific) evidence indicates. Common sense is an ally of realism about the past, and the realist can exploit MP and argue in its favor as follows:

- (1.a) It is part of the commonsense narrative about reality and our experience of it that the world has existed for longer than few minutes [Ass.]

- (2.a) The costs of endorsing realism about the past are not higher than those of endorsing rival views [Ass.]
- (3.a) Realism about the past entails that the world has existed for longer than a few minutes [Ass.]
- (4.a) Therefore, realism about the past is to be preferred to rival positions [1.a, 2.a, 3.a, MP]

Note that the Russellian skeptic does not (necessarily) question the reality of the passage of time or the reality of tenses. Regardless of whether she takes expressions as “event *e* is now past” as expressing substantive facts, or as being an indexical description (true or false only relative to temporal parameters) of the position in the temporal series of *e*, the realist can counter-argue the Russellian skeptic by appealing to the similarity between the commonsense narrative about reality and her position. The Russellian skeptic doubts that the world *existed* more than a few minutes ago. The realist replies that present evidence of its earlier existence (e. g., my memory of having had breakfast yesterday, or dinosaur fossils) disprove the skeptic’s hypothesis.<sup>7</sup> As a consequence, the costs for withstanding the Russellian skeptics are exactly the same for the A-theory and the B-theory — namely, endorsing the thesis of realism about the past. Thus, given that we have assumed that apart from the issue of passage of time and skepticism of commonsense truisms connected to it the two views are equally virtuous, neither party can appeal to an MP-based argument against the other (or, more, precisely, both can appeal equally well, hence ineffectively, given that the combination of the A-theory and realism about the past and the combination of the B-theory and realism about the past do not count as “rival views” according to the gloss in MP).

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<sup>7</sup> Does a realist about the past have to be an eternalist (or at least a non-presentist)? We have to be careful in answering. On the one hand, disqualifying any present evidence that the world existed longer than five minutes ago is compatible with maintaining that the past exists as much as the present — it just happens to be much “shorter” than common sense and science tell us it is. Hence, it is not merely by denying an ontological difference between the present and the past that the realist can withstand the skeptic. On the other hand, the skeptical hypothesis seems to push a presentist towards some sort of Dummettian anti-realism with respect to the past (See Dummett 1969). At any rate, my argument here is restricted to non-presentist forms of A-theory, as I made clear in § 2.

## The Epistemic Privilege of the Present

Before introducing the Hyper-Russellian skeptic, I need to make a short detour through a related problem. In the recent literature on the *growing block* view of time — the position according to which reality is an ever-growing block of past and present facts, we find discussions about what I will call “the problem of the epistemic privilege of the present”.<sup>8</sup> As is generally acknowledged, the problem holds not only for the growing block view, but also for any form of non-presentist A-theory, such as the moving spotlight view. Namely, it holds for any theory according to which the flow of the present is an objective feature of reality, but not only what is present exists. In order to see the problem, consider my present experience of seeing something red and my past experience of seeing something green. In the growing block view (as in the moving spotlight view), the difference between these two experiences is *not* a difference concerning what exists, but a difference concerning their “tensedness”. Present experiences are irreducibly involved in present-tensed facts (such as the fact that *I am now experiencing red*), while past experiences are irreducibly involved in past-tensed facts (such as the fact that *I was experiencing green*).<sup>9</sup>

The problem for a non-presentist A-theory is that from an *epistemic* point of view such a distinction in one’s experience seems impossible to account for. Take the experience that Caesar had when, while crossing the Rubicon in 44 B.C., he thought “Now I am changing history”. According to the non-presentist A-theorist, even now, at the moment you read these lines, reality contains that conscious experience — that is, an event in which Caesar thinks of himself as being in the present. But Caesar is *wrong* now that the present has moved ahead, although he was right back then. And how can he detect such a difference with respect to the content of his experience? Even more dramatically, how can *we* be sure we are not in Caesar’s situation? For all we know, the present could be in what is, from our point of view, the distant future. Indeed, given that there is only one present moment and an enormous amount of past ones, we are *much more likely* to be in the past than in the present. This is sad, disappointing, crazy, and — more importantly — almost certainly false as the theory that entails it.

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<sup>8</sup> See Bourne (2002), Braddon-Mitchell (2004), Forrest (2004), Heathwood (2005), Merricks (2006), Correia and Rosenkranz (2013), and Forbes (2015).

<sup>9</sup> Being “irreducibly involved” means that the fact that *I was experiencing green* cannot be reduced to the fact that at a certain time *t* (contextually individuated as one earlier than the time  $t_0$  we are considering as present) I am experiencing green. There are various ways to spell out the idea of a substantive, fundamental difference between the present and the past (facts, properties, etc.; see Fine 2005 and Sider 2011). Nothing substantial for my point hinges on the version one endorses.



Note that the B-theory is not liable to this objection. According to the B-theory, every conscious experience is present with respect to the time of its occurrence, and every experience that represents itself as present is *correct* with respect to it. Thus, Caesar's thought is correct with respect to its time of occurrence, as much as we are correct when we think of our experience as occurring in the present.

Neither strategy is available to the non-presentist A-theorist: she cannot restrict her ontology to include only present experiences, and she cannot accept that each experience is experienced as present only relative to the time of its occurrence. However, she can solve the puzzle by exploiting the uniqueness of the present in her picture in some other way in order to mark a distinction between what is present *simpliciter* and objectively, and what is just present-relative-to-its-time-of-occurrence.<sup>10</sup> Roughly, the idea is that she can maintain that *only* experiences that are present *simpliciter* (e. g., ours, but not Caesar's) are *available* to their subjects. Although the notion of 'being available' is rather vague,<sup>11</sup> it seems reasonable to say that only when an experience is available can one entertain the corresponding thought (and experience the corresponding phenomenal character). Thus, for each experience *e*, only when *e* is present *simpliciter* is it available and can be judged (correctly) to be present. The past is not replete with mistaken beliefs, because the past is replete with "zombie beliefs", and zombie beliefs are not beliefs at all — at least no consciously occurring token-beliefs.

What I wish to stress by illustrating the non-presentist A-theorist's solution to the problem of the epistemic privilege of the present is that it entails that an event *e* can change from being a conscious experience when it is present and available to being an event that is not a conscious experience, although it would one were it present and available. Let us denote by "C" the description "the set of brain facts that qualify event *e* that occurs at time *t* as a conscious experience at *t*"; that is, the facts concerning neural activity, interaction with the environment, and whatever it takes for a physical system to achieve consciousness.<sup>12</sup> According to the B-theorist, the facts in C do not change over time; they are the

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**10** See Russell (2017) "One of the peculiarities of [non presentist forms of A-theory] is that they involve two different ways of talking about time[...]. Events have temporal locations, as they precede some events and succeed others in arrangement of temporally spread-out reality. But there is also supposed to be a sense in which the block grows, or the spotlight moves — the sense in which absolute presence *changes*" (p. 163).

**11** I take it from Skow (2011). Although Skow is not discussing the problem of the epistemic privilege of the present, I take it to be a useful notion to generalize to sorts of strategies against such a problem that defenders of non-presentist A-theories have proposed in the literature.

**12** To simplify the discussion, I am assuming here that some form of physicalism is true. However, nothing would substantially change if in C we assume there are irreducibly

tenseless facts that ground the tenseless fact that experience  $e$  is conscious-at- $t$  and available-at- $t$ . According to the A-theorist, facts in  $C$  are tensed and they change as time goes by. Thus, only when  $e$  is present does  $C$  contain the facts that ground the tensed fact that  $e$  is conscious and available *simpliciter*. When  $e$  is past (or future) in  $C$  there are facts that ground the fact that  $e$  *was* (or will be) a conscious experience, and thus in  $C$  there is *no* ground for  $e$  being available and thus conscious. This is how it should be. The past exists, but there are no conscious acts in it. That is, in the past, *now*, there are only zombies, although there *were* once conscious beings. I am not taking issue here with the A-theorist's solution to the problem of the epistemic privilege of the present. The problem does not lie here; rather, as we will see, it lies in establishing where this solution leads the A-theorist when faced with the Hyper-Russellian skeptic.

## The Hyper-Russellian

We are now ready to dismiss the claim that the A-theory is (in the above-mentioned sense) closer to common sense than the B-theory. What I have called the “hyper-Russellian skeptic” (HRS for short) is less radical than the Russellian skeptic as far as *existence* is concerned. Her hypothesis is not that the universe was created a few moments ago; nor is it that our past experiences did not actually exist. According to the HRS, the whole series of experiences that constitute one's life exist. If she is a B-theorist, she will add that each experience is present relative to the time of its occurrence and past/future relative to the experiences that precede/follow it. If she is an A-theorist, she will add that only one experience is present *simpliciter*, while the others are past and future. What the hyper-Russellian skeptic doubts is that *all our past (future) experiences have been (will be) conscious and available to us*. She is skeptical because she thinks that — for all we know — *this* experience that you are having now is *the only conscious experience that you ever had, have or will have*, even if reality is constituted by all past and future brain facts that you (mistakenly) think were and will be available to you. We *are* conscious, but we *were* and we *will be* zombies! The hyper-Russellian skeptic hypothesis that the experience occurring at  $t$  is the only conscious one is defeated as soon as we have another experience at a later moment  $t_1$ . But, with respect to each moment, we cannot refute her hypothesis on the grounds of experience alone, since at each moment, if it were

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phenomenal facts of some sort. Besides, I will — a bit sloppily — talk of “the facts in  $C$ ” to refer to the facts in the set denoted by a given occurrence of “ $C$ ”.

true that past experiences existed (and future ones will exist) without having been conscious, *our present experience* would not be different.<sup>13</sup>

The fact that experience is compatible with the HRS hypothesis does not prevent common sense from telling us that reality is *not* like the hyper-Russellian says it is. Ordinary experience and common sense come not only with the assumption that the past was once present, and the future will also be present, but also the assumption that *past conscious experiences were once available to us*, and *future conscious experiences will be available to us*. Since those are truisms connected with the commonsense idea that time “really” passes, if the A-theory were not also able to withstand skepticism about them, this would be very bad news for the soundness of an argument in favor of the A-theory based on the commonsense thesis that time “really” passes and the MP.

But what does it take to withstand the hyper-Russellian skeptic? That is, what (conjunction of) theses entail the falsity of her hypothesis? There are different options, and we should opt for the one that is the least costly. Let us focus on the skeptical hypothesis about past conscious experiences for simplicity. The HRS doubts that her present memories of her own past, even if they do “correspond” to past states of her brain, were ever available to her and conscious. Thus, endorsing the thesis which before I called ‘realism about the past’ is not enough to withstand her, as it had been to withstand the Russellian skeptic. However, it may turn out that the conjunction of the thesis of realism about the past and one or more metaphysical thesis is enough to rule out the skeptical hypothesis. I argue that the B-theory alone suffices for this purpose, while we need to couple the conjunction of the A-theory and realism about the past with a further thesis in order to rule out the hyper-Russellian hypothesis. Hence, the surprising conclusion is that — by MP standards — common sense supports the B-theory rather than the A-theory.

What is, then, the difference between the A-theory and the B-theory with respect to the possibility of withstanding the HRS? Let us list what a B-theorist has to accept in order to rule out the skeptical hypothesis of the hyper-Russellian. The B-theorist only has to accept that there has been a succession of experiences with the brain properties required for consciousness. This is a claim that is entailed by realism about the past: surely we have plenty of ordinary evidence for this, and if realism is correct, it follows that those experiences existed. But then, in a B-theoretic framework, realism about the past is

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<sup>13</sup> Note that I am not assuming that experiences are instantaneous. Experiences can have a duration even for the hyper-Russellian skeptic. Her claim is that, whatever the duration of the experience you are having now, that experience is the only conscious experience that you have ever had, and will ever have.

*enough* to rule out the skeptical hypothesis of the HRS. The mere existence of those experiences in succession suffices for them to be conscious and available to us relative to their time of occurrence. Therefore, when at  $t$  the skeptic asks the B-theorist to provide a justification for her belief that yesterday her experience  $e_{-1}$  was conscious, she can answer that the hypothesis that  $e_{-1}$  exists and has the brain properties required for being conscious suffices to justify her belief that  $e_{-1}$  was conscious at the time of its occurrence. Thus, the following argument in favor of the conjunction of B-theory and realism about the past can be formulated.

- (1.b) It is part of the commonsense narrative about reality and our experience of it that past conscious experiences were once available to us [Ass.]
- (2.b) The costs of endorsing the B-theory and realism about the past are not higher than those of endorsing rival views [Ass.]
- (3.b) The B-theory and realism about the past entails that past conscious experiences were once available to us [Ass.]
- (4.b) Therefore, the conjunction of B-theory and realism about the past is to be preferred to rival positions [1.b, 2.b, 3.b, MP]

In a sense, the HRS hypothesis is simply incoherent in a B-theoretic framework once we accept realism about the past. Of course, the skeptic may still insist that, for all we know the past contained only zombie versions of ourselves, for instance because until this very moment certain essential properties for there being consciousness in you were not instantiated by your brain. But that is a *different* skeptical hypothesis, one against which no position concerning the metaphysics of *time* can do much. (And it may be doubted that it is compatible with realism about the past).

The situation is different for the A-theorist. As we noted above, in the A-theoretic framework, an event  $e$  can change from being a conscious experience when it is present and available to being an event that is not a conscious experience, although it would one were it present and available. Thus, even assuming that one's experiences existed and would be conscious were it present, this is not enough for the A-theorist to rule out the possibility that yesterday they were not available to us. The A-theorist must also assume that the present "shone on them" yesterday. Their mere *present* existence in the past is compatible with the skeptical hypothesis that they never were available to us.

An A-theorist may be tempted to protest that now  $e_{-1}$  is such that it *was* available and conscious. However, remember that it is crucial for her position

that only experiences that are presently available are available *simpliciter*. Thus, it is not simply the hypothesis that  $e$  is now present and available and that  $e_{-1}$  came before  $e$  that can rule out the skeptical hypothesis that  $e$  is the only conscious experience you ever had (more on this in the next paragraph). What we need to rule this out is the *further* hypothesis that we are not in a world where, although all the past experiences also exist, only one of them is present – the one that the skeptic is addressing. In such a *frozen present scenario* our experience would be indistinguishable from our actual experience, tense realism would be true, but the HRS hypothesis, too, would be true.

Now, the B-theorist has an advantage over the A-theorist when it comes to the assumption one has to make to rule out the HRS hypothesis; since the A-theorist has to make the same assumption as the B-theorist (i. e., realism about the past) *plus* a further one, namely, that the present is not stuck in the experience that the skeptics claims is the only conscious one. The point is clear if we formulate an argument in favour of the A-theory which has the same structure as the previous one in favour of the B-theory. Here it is:

- (1.c) It is part of the commonsense narrative about reality and our experience of it that past conscious experiences were once available to us [Ass.]
- (2.c) The costs of endorsing the A-theory, realism about the past and the falsity of the frozen present scenario are not higher than those of endorsing rival views [Ass.]
- (3.c) The A-theory, realism about the past and the falsity of the frozen present scenario, entails that past conscious experiences were once available to us [Ass.]
- (4.c) Therefore, the conjunction of the A-theory, realism about the past and the falsity of the frozen present scenario is to be preferred to rival positions [1.c, 2.c, 3.c, MP]

The advantage of the B-theorist consists in the fact that (2.c) cannot be true. Assuming that A-theory and B-theory are otherwise on a par with respect to costs and advantages (as I do, for the sake of argument), and that the two views are rivals, it follows that it cannot be the case that the A-theory, realism about the past, and the negation of the frozen present scenario is a less costly combination of theses than any of its rivals, in particular the conjunction of the B-theory with realism about the past.

## Is the Denial of the Frozen Present Scenario a Cost for the A-theorist?

There is an obvious objection to the conclusion just drawn: you say that endorsing the denial of the tensed frozen scenario is a *further* hypothesis for an A-theorist, but how can it be so given that the very core of the A-theory is that time “really” passes? The A-theory is not merely tense realism, it is tense realism coupled with the claim that *at the fundamental level* one time is present, and other times were and will be present. And this latter claim should not be construed in B-theoretic terms, i. e. as an expressions of relations between times or event in the temporal series, but as a constituted by primitively tensed expression. In other words, when an A-theorist says that now *e-1* is such that it *was* available and conscious, her claims *entail* that the present has moved, i. e. that the frozen present scenario is ruled out.

We have to be careful here, and distinguish what a tensed description of reality taken as fundamental (i. e. tense realism) entails, and what is the aim of the A-theorist in claiming that the tensed picture of reality is fundamental. I do not deny that the A-theorist’s intention is to take the passage of time as seriously as possible, but I do deny that endorsing tense realism and making the fundamentality claim above is enough to justify the soundness of the argument (1)–(4). In other words, an A-theorist can vindicate the robust sense of passage involved in the common sense narrative about reality and embrace the denial of the frozen present scenario, *only if* she goes *beyond* mere tense realism and “enriches” tenses with an irreducibly dynamic trait. I have argued for such a claim (Torrenco 2017c), here let me notice that I am not the only one who thinks something along those lines. Philosophers as diverse as Kit Fine, Huw Price and David Lipman share the same worry. Here is Lipman:

But the tensed descriptions do not capture the passage of time at all. Given that any sentence A states what obtains right now, any fact whatsoever is a current fact; in particular, that something *will obtain* and that something *has obtained* are themselves current facts. At the heart of the A-theory lies the mentioned principle that any sentence states what currently obtains, that any sentence is merely descriptive of the current state of the world. This implies that any sentence only ever specifies the contents of a single momentary stage in time, namely the current one. To state that something obtains is just to describe more of the current stage in history, and not the passing from that stage of history to the next.<sup>14</sup>

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**14** Lipman (forthcoming). See also Price (2011: 279); cf. Fine (2005: § 7) (quoted by Lipman right after the passage above). Leininger (forthcoming) argues that presentism (but possibly not other forms of A-theory) cannot account for objective passage.

If this is correct, then, fundamental tenses *per se* requires an additional dynamic element to yield a picture of reality in which we find robust passage. However, even if my opponent grants me that the denial of the frozen present scenario is a further claim that an A-theories has to make, it does not follow that such a claim is a further *cost* of the position in the relevant sense here. After all, that time “really” passes is part of the common-sense narrative about reality, and thus that the present is not stuck at some point should not count as cost *as far as the issue of closeness to common sense is concerned*. Again, here we have to be careful. In making fundamentality claims about the movement of the present, the A-theorist is giving her account of the passage of time. Given that her account of the passage aims at being a *realist* one, as opposed to what a B-theorist is doing when she claims that the fundamental level of reality encompasses only facts about events come earlier and after other events, A-theorists have to do (implicitly or explicitly) such an assumption. However, how the challenge of the hyper-russellian makes clear, it is not an assumption that simply reflect how reality *appears to us in experience*. After all, a defender of the frozen present scenario could argue that her theory is more economical than tense realism plus a dynamic present, and yet *equally adequate* with respect to experience.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, even if it is not a further assumption for an A-theorist as usually understood, it is a cost from the perspective of our naive narrative of reality, one that the B-theorist does not need to do to rule out the HRS hypothesis.

## Conclusions

The moral from the last two sections is that the assumptions that the B-theorist has to make to show that the HRS is wrong are less costly than those that the A-theorist must make. This is so by any sensible weighting of the costs, given that we have granted that the A-theory and the B-theory fare equally well in other respects, and both have to make the assumption of realism about the past; but *only the A-theorist* has to make the further assumption that the present is not stuck where the HRS suspects it is. This further assumption is not a huge cost for the A-theorist, and it is

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<sup>15</sup> As Cameron (2015: 84–85) points out, in a world where the present is “stuck”, we could still *speak* as if we were in a moving spotlight world, by providing a semantics for “ordinary claims concerning the changing of what time is present” (p. 85) in B-theoretic terms. But this does not mean that there is not a metaphysical difference between a position according to which at the fundamental level the present is stuck at one time and one in which the present moves along the temporal series.

very much in line with the very spirit of the position. However, it is a further cost, and this — dialectically — is very important, since it concerns a “Moorean” kind of advantage (being more economical in resisting the skeptical hypotheses about commonsense truisms) which is usually considered a characteristic of the A-theory rather than of the B-theory. In other words, the Hyper-Russellian allows the B-theorist a victory right in the middle of the enemy’s territory.

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