



The Ways of Presentness

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Received: 24 November 2020 / Accepted: 30 September 2021
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Abstract

The idea that the present moment is in some sense experientially privileged has been used in various *arguments from presentness* in favour of the existence of an objective present. Roughly speaking, in the literature we find two different approaches. Either by having an experience of something present we are aware of it as present (perceptual presentness), or by having an experience located in the present we are aware of our experience as present (locational presentness). While the various ways of understanding presentness can be used to formulate different arguments in favour of the existence of an objective present, none of them is ultimately tenable. Eventually, our conclusions will suggest that eliminativism is the best attitude towards presentness.

1 Arguments from Presentness

Traditionally, the idea that realism about the passage of time is supported by our experience is taken as obvious and seldom articulated in detail (cf. Craig, 2000; Smith, 1988). More recently, philosophers have started to spell out more carefully various “arguments from experience” that are used in the philosophy of time (Benovsky, 2015). Roughly, the literature presents two of such arguments in favour of the passage of time, although they are rarely distinguished (an exception is Frischhut, 2015 and partially Skow, 2015). The first family infers the reality of the passage of time from a dynamic element in our experience. This view is discussed in Baron et al. (2015), and criticised by Paul (2010), Dainton (2011), Hoerl (2014), Prosser

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(2016), Frischhut (2017), Deng (2019), Miller (2019). The second family, which is of interest here, infers the passage of time from the sense of presentness in our experience.¹ Various “arguments from presentness”, which are the focus of this article, are discussed and criticized in Perry (2001), Balashov (2005, 2015), Skow (2011, 2015), Parsons (2015), and endorsed by Baron (2017).

An argument from presentness has the following structure. One takes as premise a claim p on the phenomenology of our experience of presentness, and then concludes on the ground that the best explanation for that phenomenological datum requires a realist take on the idea of a present moment that there is an objective present. Arguments from presentness have thus the form of schema S_p below.

S_p

(I) p

(II) The best explanation for the fact that p requires that there is an objective present

(**REALISM_p**) There is an objective present

In the literature there are at least two families of arguments from presentness, depending on what kind of claim p is taken as premise (I). If one focuses on what we call *perceptual presentness*, the focus is on the object of experience and the phenomenological datum is that we are aware of what we perceive as happening in the present. If one focuses on what we call *locational presentness*, the focus is on the subject of experience. The datum is that we are aware of ourselves as having present experiences. In both families of argument, the idea behind premise (II) is that the present moment is somehow ‘privileged’, it has, in a sense to be specified, ‘special’ experiential status when it is compared to past and future moments, and in order to account for this experiential difference, we need to endorse realism with respect to an objective present.² The claim is thus that a metaphysical thesis is explanatorily crucial to account for an experiential truth.

Although there are various ways to understand **REALISM_p**, both with respect to the ontological background (roughly, whether other times besides the objective

¹ The relation between presentness and dynamism is not obvious (cf. Sattig 2019; Torrenco 2018). Arguments from experience for time passage can be based on the idea that the objective time flow is a (*sui generis*) kind of change in what is present (cf. Baron 2017).

² Sometimes scholars engaging with the empirical literature, notably Pöppel (1997) and Wittman and Montemayor (2014), are used to introduce the notion of present as simultaneity. Roughly the notion captures the phenomenon according to which two successive stimuli whose interstimulus interval is very brief (see Busch and Van Rullen 2014) are experienced as simultaneous rather than successive. This notion of presentness as simultaneity is not of interest here, since experiencing two stimuli as simultaneous does not necessarily make it the case that they are experienced as occupying the present temporal location (compare with the episodic memory of two simultaneous sounds). Secondly, it seems that the best accounts of presentness as simultaneity involves sub-personal, unconscious edits of information, rather than conscious experience. Here we are interested in whether conscious experience supports the argument from presentness. Wittman and Montemayor also introduce the notion of autobiographical presentness, which is the sense of presentness derived from our ability to locate ourselves in the present. In their view, this ability piggybacks on the sense of presentness generated either by perceptual presentness or by locational presentness. As such it is derivative from the sense of presentness we discuss in this paper.

present exist), and the details of the metaphysics (roughly, whether the objective present is thus in virtue of instantiating a genuine monadic property of presentness, or for some other reason), our considerations apply regardless of the details. However, for ease of exposition, we will assume an eternalist ontology and talk in terms of a property of objective presentness being temporarily and successively instantiated by times, along the lines of the Moving Spotlight Theory.³ We postpone to the last section of the paper how to extend our considerations also to other forms of **REALISM_p**; in particular presentism and the growing block theory.

In the next two sections, we will spell out the two families of arguments from presentness. Both the datum p , and the sense in which **REALISM_p** (“realism” for short henceforth) can be used to provide an explanation of p differ depending on whether the focus is on perceptual or locational presentness. We will see that the most plausible accounts of the phenomenology of presentness do not support the idea that realism is explanatory crucial, and hence cannot be used in abductive arguments of the form S_p . In so doing, we will cast some doubts upon the idea that there is a phenomenology of presentness over and above those phenomenological ingredients of our experiences that anyone is prone to admit regardless of their own stance toward presentness; that is, perceptual experiences such as those as of change and movement, and non-perceptual “internal” ones such as emotions and moods. If so, both conceptions of presentness tend to collapse in a form of experiential *eliminativism*, as we will call it. The last section (Sect. 4) will broaden the discussion of the arguments of presentness in relation to the other realist views on time: *presentism* and the *growing block theory*.

2 Perceptual Presentness

The first approach to presentness we consider, perceptual presentness, is object-oriented rather than subject oriented. According to it, our experience of the present is an awareness that *what* we experience is present, rather than an awareness that *we* are presently experiencing something. In general, if (and insofar as) an experience is of an object, then *what it is like* to have that experience is determined by how that object is presented to us. The idea behind perceptual presentness is that there is something in the way objects of perception are presented to us that makes it the case that we experience them as present. That something, the phenomenological element that is responsible for our awareness that what we perceive is present, is *perceptual presentness*.⁴

³ A bit more precisely, the background theory is the so-called “classic” moving spotlight theory, as discussed by Sider (2011: Chap. 8) and Deasy (2015). More elaborated “non-classic” forms are discussed in Sullivan (2012), Cameron (2015), and Deasy (2015) himself.

⁴ Valberg (1992) and others (Hoerl 2018; O’Shaughnessy 2000) talk of the relation between what is present in perception and what is temporally present. In order to avoid confusion, we will always use the term “present” in the temporal sense and talk about what is “presented” in perception (and in experience more generally).

As the name suggests, the phenomenological element in question is supposed to be part of perceptual phenomenology, rather than other kinds of experiential states. Intuitively, the present moment⁵ is the one we *perceive*, we neither remember nor anticipate it. The content of a memory — for example, our journey to Engadina last year — is presented to us as belonging to the past. We are not in Engadina *now*, we were in Engadina *then*. And analogous remarks hold for anticipation. Still other experiential states like imagination and emotions do not necessarily present their objects in the present moment: we can imagine a spider to be here *now*, but I can imagine a spider in the past or the future, or without a particular temporal location. We can be angry because someone is lying to us *now*, but we can also be angry at someone for *having been* untruthful to us.

This view of presentness can be used to argue that it is a phenomenological datum that we perceive things as present, and that datum can enter an abductive argument for objective presentness, as in the following exemplification of S_p .

S_p -1

(I') We perceive things as present

(II') The best explanation for the fact that we perceive things as present requires that there is an objective present

(REALISM_p) There is an objective present

Before looking at how S_p -1 can be understood, we briefly introduce and set apart the *projection* interpretation of perceptual presentness.⁶ According to this view, presentness is not a property of the world that it is presented to us in perception, it is rather a sensation that we project onto the world that we perceive. If premise (I') is read along those lines, any connection between the properties of what we perceive and our experience of presentness is lost, and with it the plausibility of premise (II'). The projection interpretation is thus not one that we will consider here. In order for argument S_p -1 to take off, we need to understand our experience of presentness either in representationalist terms or in direct realist terms.⁷ With this in mind, we can now move to the main interpretations of perceptual presentness — the content view and the mode view.

⁵ We will use the term “moment” in a broad sense, as standing for entities that can be experienced as having a qualitative status and being virtually instantaneous, such as (perceivable) punctuate events.

⁶ A proposal along these lines may be modelled on Velleman's (2006) view about the flow of time, or Boghossian and Velleman (1989) view about colors.

⁷ Scholars discussing perceptual presentness from the point of view of direct realism are Power (2012), Soteriou (2013), Hoerl (2018). See Recanati (2007), Almäng (2012), Kriegel (2015), Connor and Smith (2019) for a discussion from the point of view of representationalism.

2.1 The Content View of Perceptual Presentness

According to the content view, *being present* is a property that is presented to us in the contents of our perceptions; as such, we become aware of it in the same way in which we become aware of redness and sphericity by looking at an apple.⁸

If we read premise (I') along those lines, argument S_P-1 has prima facie plausibility. If we perceive presentness in the same way that we perceive colors and shapes, then there must be some objective property that the objects of perception possess and to which our perceptual organs are sensitive. However, the content approach is currently widely discarded on the grounds, roughly, of two kinds of arguments: the causal inertia arguments and the contrastability arguments. The analysis of perceptual contents by Braddon-Mitchell (2013) and the *detection arguments* by Prosser (2016) are examples of the first kind. It is generally accepted that a condition for a perceptual content to be veridical is that certain causal connections of the right sort must be in place, and they must at least in part involve the object the perception is about.⁹ However, if presentness was a property of things or events around us, it would be causally *inert*. Think of any cluster of causally efficacious properties, nothing changes in the history of their effects if we add presentness to the cluster (but for their temporal location relative to us). Given that causally inert properties *cannot* be perceived, we cannot perceive presentness.¹⁰ This criticism of the content approach to perceptual presentness can be used against the premise (I') of S_P-1 .

The second kind of arguments are based on the idea of *contrastability*. The idea is that in order for a property to be perceived, it must be contrastable; that is, in order for us to be presented with an entity *as* possessing that property, there must be other perceptual experiences that differ from it in that respect.¹¹ For example, circularity

⁸ Cf. Quentin Smith (1988), Craig (2000). According to Callender (2008)'s reading, also the antirealist Balashov (2005) shares this position.

⁹ Both Prosser and Braddon-Mitchell show that the same arguments work also under the assumption of relations between objects and perception different from causation (e.g. informational co-variance, teleological representations). We assume causation for the sake of exposition.

¹⁰ A useful referee objected that according to the realist theory of presentness, there is no causation whatsoever if presentness is not in place and thus our reasoning is question-begging. Simon Prosser (2016) offers convincing reasons to resist this claim. He notices that whatever metaphysical theory of presentness is true (i.e. either a realist or an antirealist one), physics should be unaffected. Since, the causal links involved in perception are a physical matter, perception is unaffected by whether there is presentness in the world. Notably, this is true also for mainstream dualism, according to which experiential states ultimately arise from physical bases. We leave to Prosser (2016: 38) the discussion of other forms of dualism. Another way to see the point is to notice that parsimony considerations seem to suggest that the burden of proof is on the realist here, given that presentness is an extra property with respect to the properties that suffices to provide an account of perception, at least according to well established scientific practices.

¹¹ Cf. Hestevold (1990: 241–244), Mellor (1998), Le Poidevin (2007), Skow (2011, 2015), Frischhut (2015), Solomyak (2020: 250). Hestevold rejects perceptual presentness, but not locational presentness (see Sect. 3). Solomyak presents the argument, but she provides a way to resist it. Mellor (1998) makes the well-known example of the telescope: a distant, now extinguished star, appears in the same way in which the objects in our near surroundings do. Many have complained (e.g. Hestevold 1990; Skow 2011) that the example merely shows that pastness is not a perceptible property. However, Mellor's point gives indirect support to the argument from contrast-cases: without pastness, there is nothing presentness can be contrasted with.

is a property whose perceptual experience can be contrasted. In the content of our perceptual experience, we deal with things that are circular, and others that are not circular; and we can contrast perceptual experience of the first kind and of the second kind, and find them different with respect to shape. However, so the argument goes, *everything in our perception is presented as present*, and nothing is presented as non-present. Thus, it cannot be the case that being-present is a contrastable property. It would be necessary that some things are presented (in perception) as present while others are presented (in perception) as non-present for presentness to be contrastable.¹² Given that contrastability is necessary for being a content property, presentness cannot be a property that is presented to us in the content of a perception. And if being a content property is the only way for a property to be perceived, then presentness is not perceivable after all. When we talk and think in terms that entail or suggest that we perceive present things, we are somehow mischaracterizing our experience.¹³

The argument from contrastability may be challenged in a “Husserlian” fashion by denying that *everything in perception is experienced as present*. According to what we call the theory of *intervallic content*, perception makes us aware of a succession of moments.¹⁴ A supporter of intervallic contents may further suppose that only one of these moments is presented *as present*. A position of this kind is supported by, among the others, Jan Almäng (2014), who claims that presentness is contrastable because perceptual contents present pastness and futurity along with it. We grant that the view vindicates the idea that presentness can be contrasted phenomenally. However, it does not help us to reinforce arguments such as S_p-1 . The contrast is between the *ways* different parts of the content are presented to us in perception, rather than in *what* properties are presented to us. Therefore, as Almäng also seems to acknowledge, an objective present is neither necessary nor sufficient for the contrast.¹⁵ Moreover, as we will argue more extensively in Sect. 2.3,

¹² A referee suggested that the contrastivity principle can be resisted. An alleged counterexample is the property of *being temporally extended*, which does not seem to be contrastable, and yet is perceivable. We are not convinced by the counterexample. Indeed, there are two candidates as contrast property to *being temporally extended*: the property of *being actually instantaneous* and that of *being virtually instantaneous*. Firstly, if the contrast is between actual instants (assuming they exist) and intervals (i.e., temporally extended entities), it seems correct to say that *being temporally extended* is neither contrastable nor perceivable: it is rather a precondition for spatial perception (only spatially extended entities can be perceived as entities in space). Secondly, if the contrast is to “virtually instantaneous” events, we do perceive them. They can be thought of as events that last the minimum amount of time required to become conscious (See Efron 1970; see also Dainton 2014 for a more general discussion about instantaneous experiences). And virtual instants are in contrast to temporally extended ones. More generally, we can be aware of different “degrees” of temporal extension, and that seems enough for the property of *being temporally extended* to be contrastable in some extended sense. Finally, even if the principle of contrastivity requires restrictions and adjustments, there are no clear reasons to think that presentness should qualify as an exception.

¹³ This line of reasoning is analogous to that by Paul (2010), Hoerl (2014), and Torrenco (2017a) in respect to the dynamic character of time.

¹⁴ The theory of intervallic content is at the core of those accounts of perception of motion and change that go under the label of ‘the specious present’.

¹⁵ Cf. “It is phenomenologically indeterminate whether tensed content refers to tensed properties or functions as ordinary indexicals which take as their value tenseless properties.” Almäng (2014: 378).

a position of this kind still suffers from the problem of causal inertia of the present. Even if there is a contrast between what is perceived as present and what is perceived as just past (or in the very near future), an objective present could not be responsible for such a contrast.

Another way to challenge the argument from contrastability is to appeal to the difference between memory and perception and construe it as a *phenomenal* difference. Our perceptual experience of the mountains of Engadina, for instance, presents the landscape in a different, let us say ‘more vivid’ way, than our memory of the same mountains. Unfortunately this suggestion does not help the realist about the objective present. Even if we admit a salient phenomenal difference between our perceived contents and our remembered contents, it is still the case that that premise (II’) of the argument is false. As Frischhut (2015) convincingly argues, this difference is better explained by the fact that perception and memory are two different faculties. And it seems that this alleged vividness is just the observation that the same content, the mountain, feels different when presented to the two faculties. This opens up the suggestion that this phenomenological ingredient of “vividness” (or, “presentness”) is much more an element of the faculty—or mode—rather than of the content. The “vividness” account ultimately collapses in a form of mode view we are about to analyse in the following section.

2.2 The Mode View of Perceptual Presentness

According to the *mode* view (Almäng, 2012; Kriegel, 2015; Recanati, 2007), presenting things as present is a feature that certain mental states have in virtue of being perceptual states (as opposed to other kinds of mental states), rather than in virtue of what they present to us. Again, we can use memory for contrast: there is a sense in which our perception of Engadina and our memory of Engadina present us with the same thing, a beautiful landscape. However, perception presents-*as-present* Engadina, memory presents-*as-past* Engadina. Thus, two modes of presentation (of Engadina) are involved here, one specific to perception (the one oriented towards the present), and one specific to memory (the one oriented towards the past).

The mode view can be articulated in various ways, depending on what we take a mode of presentation to be. The driving idea is that contents are associated with *what* the mental state is about, while modes are associated with *how* the subject relates to the content, and this last piece of information in the case of perception comes with an awareness of being related with present things. Consider again our previous example. Our sight of Engadina and our memory of Engadina have the same content, since they are about the same beautiful landscape. But my visual experience relates to that content in a different way than my memory does. Vision puts, as it were, the content in the present, memory puts it in the past.

Recanati (2007: 141) articulates the idea by introducing two contents, one temporally neutral (the *explicit* content), which can be shared by various modes (for instance, memory and perception), and another one tensed (the *complete* content), which is mode-specific. In the case of memory, the complete content is *past*-tense. In the case of perception, it is *present*-tense and leads to experiencing a sense of

presentness. According to Almäng (2012: 436–437), both the explicit content and the complete content are present-tensed. However, the evaluation of the explicit content changes depending on the mode. When we remember, the evaluation requires that we consider a time in the past (roughly as if we were treating the content like an utterance in the historical present). When we perceive, the evaluation requires taking into account the present time, which leads to experiencing a sense of presentness.

As Kriegel (2015), who defends it, convincingly argues, the mode view cannot be used to motivate arguments such as S_p-1 . In any of its articulations, the core thesis is that we are aware of presentness as the mode of presentation of the content specific to perception. It is thus sufficient that a perception is somehow triggered in a subject in order for them to perceive an object as located in the present. In other words, according to the mode view, it is the fact that we *perceive* something, rather than remember or imagine it, that matters for having an awareness of it as present. *What* we perceive, and thus whether what we perceive is objectively present, is irrelevant to account for such an awareness. Hence, if the mode view is correct, (II') is false and we do not need to posit any objective presentness to explain the *perceptual* phenomenology of presentness.¹⁶

2.3 Whither Perceptual Presentness?

So far we have argued that any reading of premise (I') of the argument S_p-1 debunks premise (II'). We tried several notions of perceptual presentness, but none of them helps making the argument convincing. In this section we want to push the point a bit further and show that there is no perceptual presentness at all. This is to say, there is no genuine sense of presentness in perception over and above the phenomenology of experiencing features such as shape, colour, and movement.

Let us begin by noticing that the idea of perceptual presentness naturally leads to a sort of “*Euthyphro* style” dilemma: do we perceive an object because it is located in the present (as the realist usually has it), or do we locate an object in the present because we perceive it (as the antirealist usually has it)?

If the latter direction of explanation is correct, as our discussion so far suggests, the denial of any genuine phenomenology of presentness is just one step ahead. Indeed, if we experience an object as present because we perceive it, rather than vice versa, it is natural to think that being presented in perception is a way of being experienced as present. More precisely, it is the way that is specific to perception (as we will see in the next sections, there are plausibly also non-perceptual ways of being experienced as present). In other words, if the reason

¹⁶ A referee asked us to be more explicit on whether the content and the mode view are equally available to the representationalist and the direct realist. We think that it depends on the details. In general, the content view better sits with representationalism, unless one understands perceptual presentness in terms of a relation with an objective property of presentness. As for the mode view, at least according to certain direct realists, such as Hoerl (2017), a mode-based phenomenology is not compatible with direct realism. But others (such as Campbell 2002) argue that direct realism requires that the object *partly* constitutes the phenomenal character (for a critical discussion, see Gow 2016), and this seems to suggest that a mode-based phenomenology is compatible with direct realism.

for which we postulate a genuine phenomenology of presentness in perception is to explain our awareness of the temporal location of the *object* of our perception, then it is a poor reason. The mere fact that we are aware of it as an object of perception — rather than memory or imagination — is sufficient to explain why we judge it to be located in the present. Taking this stance seriously amounts to maintaining that we do not perceive objects as located in the present, we simply perceive them. We call this position experiential *eliminativism* about presentness (eliminativism, for short).

To elaborate on our point, let us go back to the issue of intervallic contents. The leading question of the debate is whether the content of perceptual experience is temporally extended or (virtually) instantaneous. Indeed, starting from fairly uncontroversial phenomenological facts, namely that we have a genuine perceptual phenomenology of temporally extended events, like motion, change and rest, many philosophers (Soteriou, 2013; Almäng, 2014; Sattig, 2019; Power 2012) argue that perception presents us durations, rather than “snapshots” of the world as it is at an instant. An evaluation of the various positions of the debate is clearly beyond the scope of this paper. Luckily for us, both the tenet that perception’s content are temporally extended and its negation are in tension with the idea that there is a genuine perceptual phenomenology of presentness, and thus eliminativism is the more natural option no matter what.

Let’s assume contents are intervallic, and that motions are presented to us in perception. For instance the motion of a rolling ball down a slope from location l_1 to l_3 , during the temporal interval t_1 to t_3 . If we assume that perceptual presentness is genuine, the *whole* interval is perceptually presented as located in the present. As Benovsky (2012) notices, according to this view, there is a mismatch between the present temporal location attributed by perception to the rolling ball, which spans over an interval, and the real instantaneous present (if any). But then, what is responsible for the “extra” presentness that we experience, the one involving moments outside the objective present? Assuming that the objective present is responsible for the experience of the objective present as present, it must be “the mind”, in some sense, that bestows such extra presentness on the past (and perhaps future) bits of the perceived event.

This hypothesis runs into the very same problems that we have seen while discussing the attempts to defend arguments of the form S_p-1 , since it requires a non-causally-inert present, and, crucially, insofar as it requires a projectionist interpretation of the “extra” presentness it cannot be used in an argument from experience. However, one may insist that this “amodal” interpretation of the intervallic content, in which the *whole* interval is presented as present, is not the only one. In literature we find what we may call *inflationist* versions of the theory of intervallic content, according to which perception comes with a genuine sense of presentness, along with a sense of (very recent) pastness, and possibly a sense of (very near) futurity. According to the inflationist, when we see the whole motion of the ball, we see certain parts of its movement as occurring in the present, certain others as occurring in the past, (and possibly others as occurring in the future). We have discussed such

positions while arguing against the attempts to resist the augment for contrastivity (2.i).¹⁷

Now, in order for inflationism to be an alternative to eliminativism, it has to be committed to the thesis that we are aware of a difference in the way past (and future) parts of the perceived interval on the one side, and present parts are perceptually presented to us. Typically, the difference is captured in terms of tense. While the eliminativist that endorses intervallic content characterises the content as tenseless, something along the lines of [*A before B*], the inflationist must characterize it as tensed content, something along the line of [*A is past and B is present*] (see Connor & Smith, 2019). The information encoded in inflationist contents is richer because they inform us not only about the temporal order in the succession A-B, but also about the temporal location of *the experience of the succession A-B*; it tells us that it is roughly simultaneous with B. Thus, this theory predicts that information about the subject's temporal location is *manifest in perceptual experience*. In other words, inflationism is committed to the claim that the experience itself enters the content.

But that *perceptual* content is in this respect *reflexive*, that is, it contains its own perception as part, seems wrong to many people (e.g. Falk, 2003: 221, Balashov, 2005, Callender, 2017: 188–189), and it is explicitly denied by philosophers believing in the temporal transparency of experience, namely the idea that no temporal property of the perceptual experience itself is manifest in introspection (Connor & Smith, 2019; Hoerl, 2018; Soteriou, 2013). Transparency in the case of temporal (perceptual) presentness is particularly convincing, since unlike the case of perception of spatial locations, there does not seem to be phenomenal distinguishability between the temporal location of the perceiver and the object of perception. At any rate, it is doubtful that inflationism fares better than eliminativism on the ground that it explains our awareness of the temporal location of our object of perception, or our judgments that they occur in the present.

Finally, if perceptual contents are not intervallic, but (virtually) instantaneous, eliminativism seems to be the best option still. The rejection of genuine perceptual presentness is particularly in line with the rejection of intervallic contents, that is, the thesis that perceptual contents are (virtually) instantaneous and we always perceive only one moment and never a succession of moments. If in perception we are presented with only one moment as present, it is unclear why we should think of that moment as *phenomenally* privileged. If it is privileged in some sense, it is not in virtue of some properties that it displays, but rather it is so in virtue of being perceived, as opposed to remembered or anticipated. If so, it is unclear why we should think of perception as delivering any sense of presentness: to be privileged in the sense required by perceptual presentness is to be the only moment singled out in perception.¹⁸

¹⁷ Note that although some form of inflationism are not meant to revitalise arguments from presentness (i.e. Almäng 2014), some other are (i.e. Solomyak 2020).

¹⁸ Remarkably, it seems that Le Poidevin (2007:91) assumes perceptual presentness in his criticism of the specious present view. Indeed he writes: “The doctrine of the specious present, however, does not allow us retain the datum that what we perceive we perceive as present, and this is what, ultimately, makes it so implausible. The past events are still perceived, but as fading images, and this loss of vivacity, as Hume would put it, conveys the feeling of pastness. But after-images do not convey feelings of

3 Locational Presentness

Perceptual presentness leaves out cases in which we are aware of the present even if we are not perceiving anything as present. Think of lying in a sensory deprivation chamber. At a certain point you have a random thought. It seems plausible to maintain that this mere fact makes you aware that your thought *occurs in the present*. More generally, we seem to be aware of our temporal location as present, simply by having an experience (not necessarily a perceptual experience) and regardless of what the experience presents to us (if anything), or “where in time” it is presented to us. Given the sensitivity of this kind of presentness to the temporal location of the experience, we call it *locational presentness*. We notice here that there is a potential ambiguity in the terminology. One may understand “locational presentness” as expressing an aspect of our inner phenomenology that characterises experiences as occurring in the present, as opposed to the past and the future; or it can be understood as expressing the awareness of its occurring *simpliciter*. We begin with understanding the expression in the first sense, and then move to the second interpretation in Sect. 3.1 and 3.2.

A realist can exploit at their advantage locational presentness in an argument such as S_{p-2} below.

S_{p-2}

- (I'') We are aware of our own experiences as present
- (II'') The best explanation for the fact that we are aware of our own experiences as present requires that there is an objective present
- (REALISM_p) There is an objective present

The rationale behind S_{p-2} can be reconstructed in two steps. Firstly, we are aware of our own experiences as present; experiences that occurred in the past/will occur in the future do not carry the same awareness status (premise I''). Secondly, only if we assume that there is an objective present, we can explain why past, present and future experiences do not have the same awareness status. By doing so, one accounts for the fact that past and future experiences do *not* exhibit presentness. In contrast, an antirealist lacks the resources to account for this disparity, since apart from the difference in content, according to them, present experiences should not differ in awareness status from past and future ones. Therefore, the best explanation for experiencing the present is the realist one.

Upon closer scrutiny however, this line of reasoning cannot succeed to establish the truth of realism. Let us ask how exactly an objective present would “break the parity” between present experiences and non-present experiences. A natural answer

Footnote 18 (continued)

pastness at all: what we perceive are the images themselves, and these are experienced as present.” This is in tension with his explicit endorsement of eliminativism, which can be found in other passage of the same book, like the following: «It is not clear, then, that there is an interesting difference between perceiving something ‘as present’ and simply perceiving it» (Le Poidevin 2007: 78). We think this apparent contradiction is not a case: it is because, as we noted in the main text, instantaneous contents make any further sense of presentness redundant.

is that objective presentness somehow makes present experiences phenomenally different from past and future ones (Skow, 2015: 205). If so, premise (I'') has to be read as saying that we are aware of a phenomenological element, a “woosh” (Falk, 2003) that characterises the present experiences to the exclusion of past and future ones.

Now, spelling out what this phenomenological element amounts to is difficult. One suggestion is to adopt Almäng (2012)'s inflationist proposal that we saw in Sect. 2.ii and 2.iii, and characterise locational presentness in terms of a *reflexive* element in the content — i.e., an element that involves an awareness of the experience itself (cf. Peacocke, 1999: 280). Even if we ignore the fact that (as pointed out above already) many find it phenomenologically dubious that there is a reflexive element in our experience of the present (cf. Falk, 2003, Perry, 2013, Callender, 2017: Chap 9, Connor & Smith, 2019: 822–5), this attempt would be vain, because there is a general problem with interpreting premise (I'') in terms of a phenomenal element that is characteristic of locational presentness. Suppose that the moment in which you read this line of *The Ways of Presentness* you feel pleasure. Does your pleasant experience exhibit locational presentness, while your experience of boredom, which occurred twenty minutes ago, before you began reading this paper, does not? You (as anybody else) do not seem to be in a position to answer this question, since at the moment you were reading that line, you had no access to experiences occurring at different times, such as the ones you had twenty minutes before or the one that you are having now while reading *this* other line; so you cannot be aware of the difference.¹⁹ But as long as locational presentness is a property that characterises the *phenomenology* of present experiences as opposed to non-present ones (as in the first interpretation of the expression), locational presentness *requires awareness* of a difference in phenomenology between present and past (and future) experiences. Therefore, we cannot read premise (I'') in terms of an alleged characteristic phenomenology of present experiences.

Note that, also in this case, an eliminativist interpretation of presentness seems to suggest itself. If a contrast case between experiences exhibiting locational presentness and experiences which do not exhibit it is necessary for having phenomenology of presentness in the first place, but we cannot *experience* such a contrast, then there is no such a phenomenal ingredient in our experience. The fact that we are aware that the experience that we are having now (as opposed to the ones that we had and

¹⁹ A referee has objected that many accounts of Episodic Memories predict that we have access to past experience. We take advantage of this objection to specify the notion of “accessibility” we are discussing here. Episodic recollection gives us *phenomenological* access to a past experience e , such that a subject S at a time t has a e -like experience r (i.e. the recollection—which is numerically distinct from e). From a phenomenological point of view, the subject S that undergoes r at t , feels like *as if* e is occurring at t . This is not the kind of accessibility we have in mind. Our notion of accessibility involves a *metaphysical* interpretation. A subject S at a time t has access only to those experiences $e_1 \dots e_n$ that (a) belong to S (and not to any other subject S') and (b) are numerically identical to those experiences occurring at t (rather than any other time t'). So, in our view, if S is located at t , she cannot have access to those experiences numerically identical to the experiences occurring at other times t' . But this claim is not contradicted by any account of episodic memory, no matter how otherwise “direct” (e.g. Debus 2008), we are aware of.

the ones that we will have) are present is not due to some phenomenal aspect of our experience.

3.1 Absolute and Relativised Experiential Availability

The realist might interpret premise (I'') in line with the second reading of locational presentness, as awareness of the occurrence of the experience. She can thus run the argument accepting eliminativism and therefore without assuming that present experiences are phenomenally special. Indeed, we have just pointed out that an important difference between present and past/future experience is that I only *have access to* experiences located in the present moment and not to past or future ones. Only present experiences are available to me in some absolute, non-time relative sense. How this suggestion can be put to work in an argument like S_p-2 can be understood by looking at two classical papers by Prior (1957) and Hestevold (1990).

Hestevold considers the case of a patient of the dentist who feels pain now, and who also felt pain two years ago in similar circumstances. If there is no objective present, both pains exist, and are felt tenselessly by the same subject. However, only the current pain matters for the present behavior of the patient, which is why he asks the dentist for more anesthetic. Hestevold's point is that the best explanation for this difference is that only the present pain is experienced, past (and future) pains are simply non-experienced pains. And the best explanation for this phenomenal difference is that only the present pains (as opposed to past and future pains) *exist*, and their occurring at the objective present is therefore necessary for their being available to me.

Analogously, Prior complains that if there is no objective present, we cannot make sense of the feeling of relief that we typically have when the pain is over after a dental surgery. If the event of the surgery and its accompanying pain exist tenselessly, then what brings into existence the relief? Without an objective present that "moves along" and delivers the unpleasant experience to 'metaphysical oblivion', the existence of a state of relief would be utterly unexplained. The experiences that have locational presentness have changed from encompassing my pain to encompassing my lack of pain, and this change *brings about* my state of relief.²⁰

However, the antirealist has a rejoinder (cf. Prosser, 2016; Skow, 2015). The property of *being available* (for a certain subject) is not different from any other property in the metaphysical framework of antirealism. Persisting entities such as ourselves possess properties only *relative to* a time. Therefore, attributions of possession of the property of being available must be evaluated with respect to a time (whether an instant or a period): the time of occurrence of the experience to which we are attributing availability. In this framework, we can explain the difference in

²⁰ The literature on the "'thank goodness that's over!'" argument is huge, and there are different interpretations of it. Here we exploit a metaphysically loaded interpretation along the lines of Smith (1988 §5). We recommend Suhler and Callender (2012) for a completely different take on Prior's argument. The same point is discussed by Ferré (1972), Hoy (1978), Smith (1988). See also Norton (2010).

availability between *this experience*, that we happen to have now, and the experiences we had before it without appealing to an objective present.

According to the antirealist, at any time t we have access *only to* experiences occurring at t . It is true that other experiences exist at $t_n \dots t_m$, but only those occurring at t are accessible for me with respect to t (Mellor, 1998; Skow, 2011). And this limitation in accessibility is all that it takes to explain my timely behaviour. The success conditions for my behaviour to be timely are just that it occurs at the time t when it is needed, and the conditions for my motivation to act at t , rather than at previous or future times, is that only at t I have access to the experience that occur at t , and not to those that happen at past and future times. Thus the complaints by Hestevold seem easily met: *when* I am with the doctor in 2020 only the 2020 pain is accessible to me. In the same way, the sense of relief which Prior refers to can be motivated without appealing to objective presentness, since relief occurs at a time (at 13.35, say) that is *posterior to*—hence unavailable at—the time at which the dental operation happens (between 12:30 and 13:30, say). The important lesson to learn from these considerations is that while the realist endorses a notion of *absolute experiential availability*, the antirealist conceives of locational presentness as irreducibly relativised to times, that is, as *relativised experiential availability*. But *explanatorily* there does not seem to be any substantive difference between the two notions, given the respective assumptions on what kind of questions we should ask to account for a timely behaviour. For the realist is: what should one do *simpliciter*? For the anti-realist: what should one do *relative to a time t*? In the last section, we discuss this apparent stalemate and the options for the anti-realist to come out of the impasse.

3.2 The Antirealist Take on Absolute Experiential Availability

The dialectic between the realist and the antirealist at this point seems to have come to a dead end. Although some antirealists complain that the notion of absolute experiential availability is *unintelligible* (Callender, 2008, 2017: Chap. 5) or not explanatory important (Prosser, 2016: 56–57), the overall impression is that both realist's absolute experiential availability and the antirealist's relativised experiential availability seem effective at explaining why we do not have access to our past or future experiences (see end of last section). The deadend is not a complete stalemate though. The abductive argument S_p-2 cannot take off unless one adds the further premise that only the experiences that occur *at all are* those at the present moment. But this is not something that our experience informs us about: there is no way to know whether *this experience I am currently having* is the only one in reality or whether other experiences of mine occur at other times.²¹ The only way in which I may come to know it is by coming to believe a (true) metaphysical theory that binds the occurrence of experiences to the occurrence of the objective present moment. In other words, in order to launch the argument from locational presentness for realism,

²¹ See Spolaore and Torrenco (2019), and Torrenco (2017b).

one has to *assume realism*, while in order to debunk arguments of the form S_p-2 , one just needs to allow for the possibility of antirealism.

In the literature we find attempts to introduce a version of absolute experiential availability that is compatible with antirealism (Balashov, 2005, 2015, Skow, 2011, 2015: 216–221, Parsons, 2015). An antirealist may agree that there is a sense in which certain experiences are the only ones available *simpliciter* (i.e. in a non-time-relative manner) to a subject s , and at the same time she may maintain that other experiences of s exist tenselessly at other times. The “trick” is to appeal to those theories of persistence according to which objects have temporal parts or stages (see Sider, 2011; Hawley, 2020; Parsons, 2000), and apply them to the subject s . The idea is that a subject-stage of s is presented with certain experiences *simpliciter*. The price to pay for this is that the notion of identity through time must be loosened *à la* Parfit, given that the stage of me that exist at 09:00 and to which the experience of enjoying the breakfast is available *simpliciter* is *not* numerically the same than the stage of me that exist at 13:00 and to which the experience of enjoying the lunch is available *simpliciter*. But this is a price one may be willing to pay.²²

A problem with this proposal, as we see it, is that it seems to implicitly rely on the very notion of relativised availability that it is supposed to explain away. The temporal location of the subject to which experiences are available *simpliciter*—that is, the temporal stage of s —is just a fraction of the span of existence of the subject s in question. Thus, *with respect to s*, the attribution of availability (and thereby of locational presentness) is relativized to a specific moment of her life.²³

More importantly for our purposes, the attempt to resort to a non-relativised notion of experiential availability that does not collapse into the realist notion of absolute experiential availability seems to be motivated by a mixture of two assumptions, a correct one and an incorrect one. The correct assumption is that there is no *reflexive* character that is revealed in introspection when we consider our presently occurring perceptual experiences. The wrong assumption is that locational presentness has a distinctive phenomenological character nonetheless. In order to make sense of this distinctive ingredient in a way that does not bring in reflexive elements, the antirealist may resort to a non-relativised notion of experiential availability, and adjust their theory of personal persistence accordingly. But it is not clear that there is a phenomenological aspect to be accounted for; after all, the idea that the experiences that we are presently having (as opposed to the past and future ones) are privileged because they are the only ones that occur is *compatible* with eliminativism — as already pointed out. Indeed, the antirealist endorsers of non-relativised experiential availability fails to recognise that as soon as the argument from presentness is understood along the lines of experiential availability, an important switch in the dialectic occurs. Experiential availability has been introduced by the realist to give an *impersonal reading* to the argument from presentness. What matters for the

²² Skow (2011, 2015) explores both the stage-theory and the perdurantist options (but eventually seems to reject them all in favour of the relativised notion of availability). Balashov (2015) and Parsons (2015) argue that only the stage-theory is viable.

²³ See Prosser (2016: 68–69) for a similar criticism.

argument framed in this way is merely whether a subject *has a certain experience or not*, rather than what it is like to have such an experience. And this aspect of our experience (viz., the mere fact of having them) can be accounted for with no reference to any genuine phenomenology of presentness.

4 Mainstream Realist Options and the Arguments from Presentness

A final point, before wrapping up. As stated at the beginning, we have so far worked on the assumption that the background metaphysics is that of the moving spotlight view, that is an eternalist ontology together with a form of tense realism. We now consider other forms of realism with respect to presentness, and argue that the reasons we have marshalled against the arguments from presentness in the case of the moving spotlight apply *mutatis mutandis* to the other cases too. More precisely, we will ask whether either the content view, or the locational presentness view can be exploited by non-eternalist forms of tense realism, since the mode view, which assumes presentness to be ultimately an experiential property with no role played by how the world is, cannot favour any form of realism.

The first alternative we consider is *Presentism*, according to which there is an equivalence (at least at the extensional level) between what exists and what occurs at the present moment.²⁴ It seems obvious that this equivalence does not change the status of the arguments from perceptual presentness. Either the only existing entities also possess an objective property of presentness, and then our reasonings apply as before, or there is no such objective presentness property, and thus the position does not support the premise (II') in S_p-1 . What about locational presentness? Within a presentist background, we do not need to characterize locational presentness in terms of an objective notion of presentness (which identifies the moment at which our experience is located), but we can think of it in terms of the experience occurring simpliciter, in some absolute sense.²⁵ In the previous section, we have indeed characterized the experience of locational presence in these terms. But as there are no good reasons to conclude from an experience so-characterised there is an objective present time, there equally are no good reasons to conclude that there exists a unique present time. Remember that the crucial part of our argument against S_p-2 is based on the idea of (metaphysical) *accessibility* to times *other* than the one at which we are located. We argue that we have no access to past and future times while *granting* to our opponent their existence. But if this assumption is false and there are no other times beside the one at which we happen to be located, *a fortiori* we have no access to other times. In other words, if there is no experience outside

²⁴ Among defensors of presentism: Markosian (2004), Bourne (2006), Ingram (2018).

²⁵ We thank an anonymous referee for raising this objection to us. Note also that, as Frischhut (2017) and Power (2012) convincingly argue, who endorses intervallic contents has also additional problems with presentism; in particular, the mismatch between how reality is (instantaneous) and how it appears (intervallic) makes subjects undergo a massive illusion.

the present time, subjects cannot have access to past or future experiences to feel the “woosh!” of the present.

The second alternative is the Growing Block view, according to which the “objective” present is (or at least is coextensive with) a topological property, that of *being at the edge of an ever-growing reality*. In this scenario, there are past entities, but there are not future ones. Present entities are the last that have come into existence. With respect to the arguments based on perceptual presentness, this view as well does not bring anything new into the picture. Either there is no property of objective presentness (since it is reduced to the topological property just mentioned) and thus no such property can be part of our perceptual contents; or, if there is, the arguments against entering the perceptual content are untouched by the change in ontology. The case of locational presentness is only superficially more complex. To debunk the arguments from locational presentness, we need to look at B-theoretic eternalism if we consider times in the past, and notice that we have the same form of lack of access to past experiences; we need to look at presentism if we consider future times, and notice that we do not have access to future experiences, because they do not exist.

5 Conclusions

The current debate on whether experience favors a realist stance towards the present shows there is no univocal way in which the notion of presentness is understood. As a consequence, the various arguments from presentness that aim to establish the truth of realism have to be evaluated by taking into account all the different shades that the notion of presentness may take. However, as soon as they are distinguished and carefully articulated, the force of the argument plummets. This upshot may be due to the fact that any putative phenomenology of presentness can be captured by the phenomenology of our (perceptual or non perceptual) experiences with no reference to presentness, as for the thesis that we called *eliminativism about presentness*.²⁶

Funding Open access funding provided by Università degli Studi di Milano within the CRUI-CARE Agreement. Project “Departments of Excellence 2018–2022” of the Italian Ministry of Education, University and Research. Project PID2019-108762GB-I00 of the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation.

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²⁶ We wish to thank two very useful referees of this journal. This research was funded by the Department of Philosophy “Piero Martinetti” of the University of Milan under the Project “Departments of Excellence 2018–2022” awarded by the Ministry of Education, University and Research (MIUR), and by the project CHRONOS (PID2019-108762 GB-I00) of the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation.

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