

Beyond “Beyond A- and B-time”

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Abstract This Article critically discusses Clifford Williams’ claim that the A-theory and B-theory of time are indistinguishable. I examine three considerations adduced by Williams to support his claim that the concept of time essentially includes transition as well as extension, and argue that, despite its *prima facie* plausibility, the claim has not been adequately justified. Williams therefore begs the question against the B-theorist, who denies that transition is essential. By Williams’ own lights, he ought to deny that the B-theory is a (realist) theory of time; and thus his claim that A-time and B-time do not differ significantly should be rejected.

Keywords Clifford Williams · metaphysics of time · A-theory · B-theory

In a number of articles since the mid-1990s Clifford Williams has argued that the metaphysical theories of time known as the A-theory and B-theory are, contrary to the opinions of their respective proponents, indistinguishable from one another.¹ One of the chief respects in which the two theories are normally held to differ is that, while the A-theory (in each of its several varieties) maintains that time “flows” (in the sense that there is, in reality, a passage of events from future to present to past), the B-theory maintains that this flow is merely apparent. Williams’ view is that it is this dispute, and not the flow of time, which is merely apparent; he maintains that the dispute has been generated, and perpetuated, as a consequence of misunderstandings about the two theories concerned, and especially about the B-theory’s construal of temporal flow.

Williams’ argument has two main strands. The first of these hinges upon a claim about the concept of time. He maintains that this concept comprises two aspects, these being

¹In this article, I will primarily be concerned with Williams’ “Beyond A- and B-Time,” *Philosophia*, 31 (2003), 75–91 [hereinafter cited as “Beyond”]. Reference will also be made to two other of his articles, namely: “The Metaphysics of A- and B-Time,” *Philosophical Quarterly*, 46 (1996), 371–81 [“Metaphysics”]; and “A Bergsonian Approach to A- and B-Time,” *Philosophy*, 73 (1998), 379–93 [“Bergsonian”].

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temporal extension and transition, and that if either of these aspects is missing then we do not really have a concept of time at all.

The second strand of Williams' argument is to assert that, since the A-theory and the B-theory are both theories of time, they must agree that temporal transition does indeed occur, even if B-theorists appear to deny this. They must agree on this since, Williams maintains, any application of the concept of time entails at least an implicit acceptance of transition.

When tied together, these two strands lead Williams to conclude that there is no genuine disagreement between A-theorists and B-theorists about the nature of time. He then concludes, further, that metaphysicians need to look beyond these theories if an adequate theory of time is to be devised.

While I am sympathetic to the view that neither the A-theory nor the B-theory provides an adequate theory of time, I will restrict my discussion in this article to the merits, or otherwise, of Williams' argument. I will argue that, by the lights of his own understanding of the concept of time, Williams ought to conclude that the B-theory is not a theory of time at all – or, rather, not a realist theory of time – and hence that there is in fact a significant difference between it and the A-theory. Since, however, Williams has not provided adequate grounds for accepting his analysis of the concept of time, it would seem that he has merely begged the question against the B-theorist.

Williams' Assertion of the "Conceptual Truth" about Time

Williams considers it to be "a conceptual truth that time flows."² By this, he means that "the very concept of time contains the idea of transition."³ For the most part, Williams regards this claim as not standing in need of justification. He says of it, for example, that it "is a truism, it seems to me. For anything to be time, it must possess transition. If it did not, we would not want to call it time."⁴ On the basis of this conceptual claim, Williams asserts that "Whatever theory [of time] one advances must contain the concept of flow."⁵ To him, "it seems obvious that any theory of time would have to contain reference to some sort of transition."⁶ Notwithstanding the putatively truistic nature of the conceptual claim, however, Williams does, as part of the most recently published version of his argument, offer three "connected considerations that make [the] claim reasonable."⁷ The first of these concerns our "getting from time to time," the second concerns "the difference between temporal and spatial extension," and the third is an appeal to C. D. Broad's distinction between "the extensive and transitory aspects of time."⁸ The second and third of these considerations overlap, and so I will discuss them together, after having discussed the first.

What Williams says about "getting from time to time" is that

We cannot get from one time or event to another unless there is transition between them. It is transition that carries us along and gets us to later times. We have to traverse, or "go through," intervening intervals to get from one time to the next. If we

² "Beyond," 78.

³ "Bergsonian," 383.

⁴ "Bergsonian," 383.

⁵ "Beyond," 78.

⁶ "Metaphysics," 372.

⁷ "Beyond," 78.

⁸ "Beyond," 78–79 (I have here omitted Williams' italicization).

did not traverse intervals between moments, we would be stuck at the earlier moments. This is a conceptual truth about time, whether it be A-time or B-time.⁹

An initial obstacle to understanding this passage is the lack of explication of the crucial term “we.” Given this lack of explication, it is worth quoting another passage, from one of Williams’ earlier articles, in which he briefly discusses “The datum [...] embodied in the epigraph to Bergson’s *Creative Evolution*: ‘I find, first of all, that I pass from state to state.’ This datum,” Williams continues,

is not, of course, just that Bergson himself intuits the passing from state to state, but that others do so as well. The datum is, in fact, that all of us do. What we first notice about time is some sort of shift or transition. We may not think of it as being ‘from state to state,’ as Bergson puts it, but we do, like Bergson, experience it as passing – something like a motion, but not itself a motion.¹⁰

If, as seems plausible, Williams is talking about the same “datum” in this passage as in the last, then we can reasonably assume that what he means by the assertion that “We cannot get from one time [...] to another unless there is transition between them” is, roughly, that we could not have the sort of experience that we do have if there were no transition from one time to another. This strikes me as being a thoroughly plausible claim. However, it also strikes me as being a claim primarily about the temporal nature of our experience, and perhaps about the necessary conditions of our experience, but not about – or, at least, not obviously about – the *concept* of time. There seems, therefore, to be an unstated premiss in Williams’ move to the conclusion that “This is a conceptual truth about time, whether it be A-time or B-time.”

The unstated premiss is, I take it, that there is a vital link between our experience of time and the concept of time. Again this sounds plausible to me, but it remains unclear what Williams takes the link to consist in. Williams needs to say more about this link in order for us to have a reason to accept his proposal that it is a conceptual truth that time flows.

Turning now to Williams’ invitation to consider “the difference between temporal and spatial extension,” what he says under this head reads (in part):

[...] if there were no transition between different moments or events, temporal extension would not differ from spatial extension. There must be something that differentiates the two kinds of extensions, and this can only be transition.¹¹

In connection with this point, it is worth mentioning Williams’ third consideration, which is merely an appeal for us to recall what Broad tells us about the difference between A-time and B-time. On Broad’s analysis, the difference between these two conceptions of time consists in the fact that, while the former conception acknowledges both the extended and the transitional nature of time, the latter conception, namely B-time, disregards the transitional component. This is the old complaint that the B-theory “spatializes” time.

Williams does not agree that the B-theory spatializes time; but I will say more about that in the next section. What Williams is presently trying to show is that time has two aspects – an extended one and a transitional one – and that these aspects are jointly constitutive of the concept of time. He and Broad concur that, while it is possible to have a concept of

⁹ “Beyond,” 78–79.

¹⁰ “Bergsonian,” 382.

¹¹ “Beyond,” 79.

extension without a concept of transition, this would be a concept merely of spatial extension; to make it temporal, transition is required.

To me, once again, there seems to be some plausibility in Williams' point; but I am someone who is already sympathetic to the conceptual claim that he, following Broad (and many others), is making. I am doubtful that he has done anything to persuade someone who is initially antagonistic to this conceptual claim. Contrary to what Williams contends about the B-theory's implicit acceptance of temporal transition, I think the B-theorist is liable to regard Williams' proposal concerning the difference between temporal and spatial extension as merely begging the question against a B-theoretic conception of time. I will say more about this below.

Begging the Question Against the B-theory

In order to show that transition is essential to the concept of time, Williams would have to do more than merely remind us that there is a difference between temporal and spatial extension. We can all agree that there is a difference; the tricky task is to identify in what the difference consists.

By claiming that the difference can consist only in temporal extension's involving transition, Williams begs the question against the B-theorist who maintains that all it takes for time to be extended is for there to be a series of times "spread out" along a temporal dimension. To the complaint that, in the absence of transition, this would amount merely to a spatial spread, the B-theorist can respond that the complaint illegitimately presupposes the conceptual priority of spatial extension. If, instead of presuming that temporal extension must be like spatial extension with something added thereto, we accept from the outset that there are two kinds of extension – one spatial and the other temporal – and that the first of these consists in a spreading within the three dimensions of space whereas the latter consists in a spreading along the one dimension of time, then there ceases to be any reason for regarding transition as intrinsic to temporal extension.

The B-theorist will concur with Williams that our temporal experience involves transition, but will maintain that this, on its own, gives us no reason to presume that transition is involved in temporal extension. Were someone to ask what temporal extension without transition could possibly *look like*, the B-theorist will consider himself entitled to reject the question as ill-conceived: temporal extension, when we experience it, does indeed *appear* to be transitional, but is not intrinsically so. Whether this position is ultimately coherent is perhaps open to challenge, but Williams has not adequately challenged it. To do so he would, again, have to show that the concept of time is connected with our experience in such a way that it could not exclude transition while still remaining a concept of time.

It needs to be remembered that Williams' argument is not that the B-theory fails to constitute a theory of time because it misapplies the concept of time. Rather, Williams accepts all along that the B-theory does not misapply this concept and hence does indeed constitute a theory of time. Thus, after having asserted that "There must be something that differentiates [temporal and spatial extension], and this can only be transition," Williams adds that, "Again, this is as true of B-time as much as it is of A-time. B-time, it is worth remembering, is still time."¹² It is not at all clear to me why Williams maintains this confidence that "B-time [...] is still time." It seems that he has discounted, a priori, the possibility that B-theorists are misapplying the concept of time, that they have failed to

¹² "Beyond," 79.

grasp this concept because they have failed to notice that transition is essential to time. Since he gives no other reason for discounting this possibility, it would appear that he accepts that the B-theory is a bona fide theory of time merely because B-theorists claim that it is. And, while this may be a pro tanto reason for presuming that the B-theory is indeed a theory of time, it is not a sufficient reason for regarding the presumption as correct.

Formalizing Williams' Argument

In order to clarify some of the points I have just made, it will be helpful if we represent Williams' argument more formally than he does himself. The main steps can be represented as follows:

First strand

- (1) The concept of time must include both extension and transition. [Premiss]
- (2) Any metaphysical theory of time employs the concept of time. [Premiss]
- (3) Any metaphysical theory of time accepts (at least implicitly) that time includes both extension and transition. [From (1) and (2)]

Second strand

- (4) The A-theory and the B-theory are metaphysical theories of time. [Premiss]
- (5) The A-theory and the B-theory both accept (at least implicitly) that time includes both extension and transition. [From (3) and (4)]
- (6) There are no other significant differences between the A-theory and the B-theory. [Premiss]
- (7) The A-theory and B-theory are indistinguishable. [From (5) and (6)]

In this article I have not tried to question premiss (1). I think Williams' view of the concept of time is plausible; however, it remains the case that he has not given us sufficient reason to accept it. Premiss (2) seems irreproachable; and thus, if we take this premiss to mean that any metaphysical theory of time employs the concept of time in such a way that it regards itself as being about time as conceived by means of this concept, then the conclusion at step (3) follows validly.

The major trouble for Williams' argument comes to light at step (5). While the A-theorist will gladly accept that time includes both extension and transition, the B-theorist will not.¹³ Williams maintains that the B-theorist implicitly accepts the transitional aspect of time; but this seems implausible. The B-theorist explicitly denies that time, in itself, involves transition, and Williams' only ground for asserting that the B-theorist accepts transition implicitly is the first strand of his argument. But the first strand relies on its first premiss, and this has not been adequately justified by Williams.

It thus seems that Williams, in the light of his own understanding of the concept of time, is not entitled to regard the B-theory as a metaphysical theory of time. His conclusion, that the A-theory and the B-theory are indistinguishable, is therefore unfounded.

¹³ Arguably, a proponent of the presentist version of the A-theory might accept transition while rejecting temporal extension. For our present purposes, however, it is not necessary to dwell on this matter.

Conclusion

The conclusion, that the B-theory is not a metaphysical theory of time at all, seems extreme. The B-theorist will say, of course, that this conclusion is false because premiss (1) in Williams' argument is false: the concept of time, according to the B-theory, need not include transition. If, like Williams, we wanted to maintain that it must include transition – and hence that a putative concept of time without transition is not a genuine concept of time at all – then there are, I think, options open to us that do not require our dismissing the B-theory entirely. Let us recall Williams' remark that "it seems obvious that any theory of time would have to contain reference to some sort of transition."¹⁴ Now, the B-theory certainly does make reference to transition; for, as I have noted, B-theorists standardly admit that our experience involves temporal transition. One of the chief respects in which the B-theory differs from the A-theory is that, while the latter attributes transition to events themselves, the B-theory construes this transition as a purely experiential phenomenon – as a feature, not of events, but exclusively of the way in which they are experienced. It thus seems appropriate to characterize the A-theory as realist about transition, and the B-theory as antirealist about it.

Given that Williams regards transition as an essential constituent of the concept of time, it would seem that he should regard the B-theory as an antirealist theory of time. This amounts to a very significant difference between the B-theory and the A-theory, and hence Williams is wrong to conclude that the two theories are indistinguishable.

All of this, however, hinges upon the extent to which we are willing to credit Williams' claim concerning the concept of time. And since it is not clear how Williams is going to make his claim, that the concept must include transition, stick, we have, at present, yet to be given a reason to think that Williams is doing anything more than begging the question against the B-theory.

¹⁴ "Metaphysics," 372.