

***The Alternative* Father of the Specious Present**

The Experience of Time, from E. Robert Kelly's
The Alternative: A Study in Psychology

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ABSTRACT

The now common, if not uncontroversial, terminology of 'the specious present' was coined in Kelly's *The Alternative* (1882). Through returning to Kelly's work, I have three aims. First, to make the case for there being two distinct motivations behind an appeal to a temporally extended experience as of the present: a phenomenological sense in which an interval of time invariably seems temporally present; and a need to account for the experience of succession. Second, to bring into focus—explaining and dissolving—a puzzle of temporal experience encapsulated in Kelly's appeal to 'paradoxical' and 'anti-paradoxical' experience. The third and subsidiary aim is to provide the first substantial outline of Kelly's account of temporal experience. Despite the common usage of Kelly's terminology in contemporary discussions of the experience of time, there is no dedicated discussion of Kelly, and of his view of our experience of time, in the literature. This is, no doubt, in large part due to the identity of Kelly being shrouded in mystery until very recently; it is also, plausibly, because of Kelly's standing as an amateur philosopher. Nevertheless, the minor aim of the present paper is to remedy this neglect.

[Experience's] objects are given as being of the present. . . [and the] present to which the datum refers is really a part of the past—a recent past—delusively given as being a time that intervenes between the past and the future. (Clay [Kelly] 1882, 167–68)

[T]he original paragon and prototype of all conceived times is the specious present, the short duration of which we are immediately and incessantly sensible. . . . [T]he specious present. . . stands permanent, like the rainbow on the waterfall, with its own quality unchanged by the events that stream through it. (James 1983, 630–31)

1. Introduction: *The Alternative* Father Of The Specious Present

The notion of ‘the specious present’ has been controversial—and somewhat mysterious—since it was introduced to wider discussions of philosophy and psychology. The term is typically taken to single out our experience as of the present, and as the name suggests this experience is taken to be delusive, but further specifying how the notion is to be understood introduces a host of complications—both interpretative and philosophical. The terminology is traditionally traced to James’ *Principles of Psychology* (1983), with an addendum that James credits ‘Clay’ with coining the term.

Andersen and Grush (2009, 295) identified that ‘Clay’ was a pseudonym for E. Robert Kelly. After building a successful cigar company Kelly developed an interest in philosophy, writing and anonymously publishing *The Alternative: A Study in Psychology* (Clay [Kelly] 1882). At the time of publication Henry Sidgwick offers an opinion of the work to the Editor, which is used as an advertisement for the book. In it, Sidgwick praises “the amount of vigorous, precise, and independent thinking that it contains” but adds that he “cannot but wish the Author had somewhat restrained his impulse to innovate in technical terminology.” But this impulse to innovate is what gave us ‘the specious present.’

In the present section I provide a brief background to Kelly’s work, as well as context on the specious present, to motivate and situate the discussion to follow. In the subsequent sections of the paper, I present Kelly’s methodology and trace some similarities between Kelly and Shadworth Hodgson. While William James (1983) takes the terminology of the specious present from Kelly, his chapter on the perception of time draws significantly from Hodgson. The latter is best known as one of the founders of the British Academy and the first president of the Aristotelian Society, and he penned several works in metaphysics, broadly construed (see e.g. Hodgson 1878, 1898; and see Andersen 2017, for greater discussion of Hodgson on temporal experience). I argue that Kelly and Hodgson independently developed their ideas about a temporally extended present of experience. I then turn to consider how Kelly introduces the notion of the specious present, as well as the

distinction he draws between paradoxical and anti-paradoxical experience. In doing so, two distinct motivations behind an appeal to a temporally extended present experience are revealed—a phenomenological sense in which an interval of time invariably seems temporally present; and a need to account for the experience of succession—as well as a less discussed and yet puzzling issue concerning how theorists are to conceptualise experience of (and at) an instant, encapsulated in Kelly's appeal to paradoxical and anti-paradoxical experience.¹

To end, I outline what follows from this discussion, for interpreting Kelly and for contemporary discussions of temporal experience. In meeting these aims, the paper should be of interest to historians of Anglophone and analytical philosophy, and to historians and philosophers of temporal experience. Scholars interested in the specious present, and temporal experience more generally, frequently treat James as the launching pad for this line of research; the present paper helps to contextualize the notion and elucidate the motivations behind its introduction and continued use.

1.1. Kelly as an amateur philosopher

Despite the lasting legacy of Kelly's work being restricted to the introduction of the terminology of 'the specious present', as quoted and popularised by James, Kelly's intentions in writing his solitary contribution to the field were more grandiose. Kelly goes as far as to make a biblical comparison, saying that his "intention in laying bare the abjectness and wretchedness of our condition coincides with that of the Gospel without its supernaturalism and mysticism" (1882, 16). Kelly is especially interested in whether deterministic laws and unconscious mental events imply that all action is generated by causes outside of conscious awareness (see e.g. 97–8), and he is concerned to show that *we are* capable of acting of our own volition, so that a subject's "practical life is initiated and controlled by his conscious mind" (4). Granting that we are capable of acting of our own volition, he recommends acting in self-abnegation and he suggests that, in doing so, we can reform our instincts until they are 'Christlike' (212). Kelly's recommendation of

¹For a related discussion of how distinct motivations for an appeal to the specious present can be identified in the work of James (1983) and William Stern (2005), see Shardlow (2020).

self-abnegation may be one explanation for the work being published anonymously (discussed below).

To support a shift away from Positivism and a return to Common Sense Philosophy, Kelly finds it necessary to first provide definitions for a new classification of mental events and faculties—this constituting the first and longest book of the work. In doing so, he regularly draws upon established well-known figures, such as Locke, Hume, and Kant. There are also frequent appeals to Hamilton as a shining light of Common Sense Philosophy (see e.g. 1882, 52). Despite being an amateur philosopher, Kelly was not afraid of disagreeing with and criticising his influential predecessors. He complains that ‘experience’ as a genus hasn’t been sufficiently studied, and that this has created confusions in the work of Hume and Kant (see 156); contra Kant he also looks to demonstrate that knowledge of time and space is derived from experience (see chapter XV).

Though Kelly attempts to tackle some big names in philosophy, his standing as an amateur becomes evident through his failure to substantially engage with his contemporaries. Burns-Gibson says as much in a review of the book for *Mind* (1883, 109), suggesting that Kelly, while enthusiastic, did not present himself as a great scholar, insofar as his work evidences little interaction with wider contemporary works in philosophy and psychology. Yet, as Sidgwick says (see above), Kelly nonetheless presents himself as an interesting and often precise thinker, though he may be overly enthusiastic for coining new terminology and, for some topics, re-inventing the wheel.

The interesting claims advanced by Kelly motivates there being *some* discussion of his work in the literature, notwithstanding his amateur scholarship. There are also two more substantial motivations for the present interrogation of Kelly’s work. First, Kelly’s discussion of our experience of time can reveal two distinct motivations for appealing to the notion of the specious present. Second, Kelly’s appeal to the notions of paradoxical and anti-paradoxical experience demonstrates some of the complexities we encounter when appealing to the not-so-innocent idea of experiential instants. Each of these points are particularly pertinent to debates today, given the recent growth in interest in views of perceptual experience over time which reject an appeal to the specious present and instead advocate for a series of instantaneous, experiential snapshots

(see e.g. Le Poidevin 2007; Prosser 2016; and Arstila 2018). But, before focusing on Kelly, I provide some context via James' more well-known use of the term 'specious present'.

1.2. The specious present: as introduced and as popularly understood

Kelly's 'specious present' found a lasting legacy in James' influential treatment of the experience of time. In his discussion, James (1983, 631) characterised the specious present as "the short duration of which we are immediately and incessantly sensible." James also takes there to be an important sense in which this duration seems to be 'temporally present', as opposed to past or future. So characterised, James may be read as picking out something akin to the (typically invariable) temporal interval presented *as present* in ongoing perceptual experience—and this is reflected in the quotation from James (and that from Kelly, quoted by James) at the outset.

Discussing the temporal extent of our perceptual experience, James also says that it is "only as parts of this *duration-block* that the relation of succession of one end to the other is perceived" (1983, 609–10). In this context, it is plausible that he has in mind something like a perceptual interval *in virtue of which* we perceive succession—i.e., motion and change—in the way that we do. In what follows, I recommend distinguishing more explicitly between this characterisation, which is tied to the experience of succession, and that which is outlined in the previous paragraph, which is tied to the presentation of an interval *as temporally present*, with reference to claims made by Kelly.

In work on temporal experience that has followed James, the specious present often remains a central focus (for an overview see Dainton 2022). In addition to theorists speculating about the length of the specious present (see e.g. Dainton 2000, 171; Lockwood 1984, 381), and offering different accounts of its temporal micro-structure (see e.g. Dainton 2008; Grush 2007; Lee 2014; Phillips 2014), some theorists have argued that the very idea that there is a temporal interval presented in ongoing perceptual experience is implausible or under-motivated. (It goes contra-Reid (2002); it is criticised by Plumer (1985); and it is the object of the ire of snapshot models of temporal experience, such as those advanced by Le Poidevin (2007); Chuard (2011); Prosser (2016); and Arstila (2018).

Such models are in turn criticised by Phillips (2011) and Shardlow (2019).) Thus, gaining a clearer picture of what is supposed to motivate appeal to the specious present promises to contribute to contemporary debates; this is one incentive behind interrogating Kelly, which I return to below.

In what follows, I present the general assumptions, views, and methodology adopted by Kelly, tracing similarities between Kelly and Hodgson and arguing that the two independently developed their ideas about a temporally extended present of experience (Section 2). In the primary section of the paper, Section 3, I turn to consider how Kelly introduces the notion of the specious present, as well as the distinction he draws between paradoxical and anti-paradoxical experience, revealing how he accounts for the experience of succession and the independent motivation for introducing the notion of the specious present. To end, in Section 4, I outline what follows from this discussion, for interpreting Kelly and for contemporary discussions of temporal experience.

2. Independent Inventors and Kelly's Methodology in *The Alternative*

Before turning to Kelly's claims concerning our experience of time, I review his methodology and approach to philosophy; doing so helps to bring out how he and Hodgson came to independently offer remarkably similar proposals of an extended present in experience. Much of Kelly's work is dedicated to a process of reflection and definition (see e.g. how Kelly introduces the three books of the work—Clay [Kelly] 1882, 13). Explaining this method, he describes himself as operating with something akin to what we would call introspective reflection. He says:

"I draw my principal general lines within the pale of the records of consciousness visible to retrospect. This domain exhibits to retrospect, not merely records of the simplest units, but also records of groups of consciousness determined by the mutual likeness of the units and their difference from all other units. Our ideas of kinds of consciousness originate in discernments of these groups, e.g. the groups, visual consciousness, auditory consciousness, remembrances, judgments, inferences, imaginations, etc." (Clay [Kelly] 1882, 6).

Kelly says that these ‘kinds of consciousness’ are ‘manifest to retrospect’ and that these “seem to be the divisions of the domain of consciousness the demarcation of which facilitates in the greatest degree an exhaustive survey of the field” (1882, 7). By ‘retrospect,’ he says he means the “discernment of what is given as being the whole or a part of the obvious past. . . [that is,] a past experience of the subject” (74). Retrospect is to be distinguished from ‘remembrance’, by which he says he means “retrospect that seems to be immediate discernment of a past event undergone by the subject.” One way of understanding this distinction is that retrospect is, for Kelly, more of a general mental activity directed at other mental activities; it is something one engages in, much like introspection.² Remembrance, by comparison, is thought of as memory (and plausibly what is today called episodic memory, since he appeals to the immediate discernment of a *past event undergone by the subject*), and memory which can itself be an object of retrospect. Drawing the distinction in this way makes sense of the various mental operations that retrospect can take as its objects, including remembrance; thus, in what follows, remembrance can be taken to be akin to memory and retrospect akin to introspection.

The investigation of the distinct aspects of consciousness manifest to retrospect is, Kelly says, the foundation of his approach. In this investigation there are two fundamental assumptions for Kelly: his empiricism and his appeal to common sense. Justifying the former, he says: “When the origin of an idea can be consistently imputed to experience, common sense demands that it be so imputed, though the notion of an *a priori* origin be consistent” (Clay [Kelly] 1882, 77). Hence his methodological empiricism is justified by appeal to common sense.

Kelly suggests that many common sense positions being abandoned and/or criticised by his contemporaries can be maintained if sufficiently well-articulated—and there are plentiful references to Hamilton as a shining example of this methodology in Kelly’s work.³ This influence is shared with Hodgson, who drew from Hamilton as well as other figures

²Though, unlike some contemporary conceptions of introspection, Kelly appears to take retrospect to have as its object something entertained by the subject *immediately previously*, rather than concurrently. This may be similar to Brown’s (1857, 303) notion of ‘rapid retrospect’ (for discussion, see Andersen and Grush 2009).

³He explicitly indicates that he follows the Scotch (and French) schools of Common Sense in some respects (Clay [Kelly] 1882, 52); appeals to Hamilton as a point of authority

in the Scottish Common Sense Tradition, as Andersen and Grush (2009, 293–95) outline. The common influence of Hamilton, and Common Sense Philosophy more generally, is plausibly one reason why each Kelly and Hodgson independently arrived their related notions of the specious and the empirical present, since Hamilton claims that there being some positive duration is “a necessary condition of thought” (1856, 571). Each of Kelly and Hodgson can be read as taking up the claim from Hamilton that there is some minimal temporal span to consciousness, developing this claim in their own ways.⁴

Kelly is also insistent that substantial progress can be made in philosophy through setting forth appropriate definitions when we detect relevant differentia in retrospect. He acknowledges people may be suspicious that, through such a methodology, all he is doing is providing a relabelling of familiar phenomena, but looks to distance himself from this charge. (In doing so, he appears to be at least peripherally aware of the issue that later comes to be known as the paradox of analysis via G. E. Moore (1903).) He says that this process of retrospect and definition—similar to introspection and conceptual analysis—provides a genuine increase in knowledge, and “often an increase of the greatest importance” (Clay [Kelly] 1882, 12), though he doesn’t explain in any detail precisely how he avoids the worry raised; perhaps the reader is simply invited to discover this for herself as she reads.

In pursuing such a methodology, there are again parallels between Kelly and Hodgson. In his analysis of the present moment of experience, Hodgson is explicit in inviting the reader to herself engage in analysis in order to see the plausibility of the proposal he offers. He says: “It is an analysis, not an argument; and its proof lies in accuracy of observation,

(see e.g. Clay [Kelly] 1882, 45–6; 64; 69); and even outlines issues on which he sees himself as more in line with common sense than Hamilton (see e.g. Clay [Kelly] 1882, 34; 74).

⁴And considering their contribution to what remains a thriving topic of research in philosophy and psychology—a contribution such that Kelly and Hodgson have since been described as the ‘independent inventors’ of the specious present theory (see Andersen 2014, 30)—discussions of the work of Hodgson and Kelly are few and far between. The tide may be changing for Hodgson’s work (see e.g. Andersen 2017, 2023), but at the time of writing there is no dedicated discussion of Kelly (though Andersen discusses Kelly in relation to Hodgson and James). Thomas (2023) also argues that a historical account of the origins of the specious present ought to mention the work of an inter-connected group of English philosophers writing on our experience of time during the second half of the eighteenth century: David Hartley, Joseph Priestley, Abraham Tucker, and William Watson.

not in cogency of inference" (1898, 46).⁵ In a similar fashion Kelly's hope seems to be that, by working through this analysis for herself, the reader will be able to appreciate that his method does increase one's knowledge. The importance Kelly ultimately assigns to such reconstructive definitions is evidenced by the fact that the first book of his work, spanning 19–266, is dedicated entirely to such definitions (whereas the other two books together span the relatively meagre 267–387).

Kelly and Hodgson are each seemingly influenced by Hamilton (and Common Sense Philosophy more generally), and by the claim that there is some minimal temporal span to consciousness, and each is inviting the reader to recognise the plausibility of this claim through engaging in the analysis herself. Given their common influences, interests, and methodologies, it is little wonder that each of Kelly and Hodgson arrive independently at their respective notions of the specious and empirical present—and it is, I think, plausible that the two do arrive at their notions *independently*.

Granted, the introductions for Kelly's specious present and Hodgson's empirical present are very similar (see Hodgson 1878, 1 & 2:249–52). The latter's *Philosophy of Reflection* (1878) was also published four years in advance of *The Alternative* (1882). Yet, despite such similarity, there are reasons for doubting that Kelly plagiarised the notion (and here I concur with Andersen and Grush). Throughout *The Alternative* Kelly appears happy to cite and give credit to other theorists when relevant—as well as criticising them as he sees appropriate. In other (unrelated) passages he even notes where he has come across work which strikes him as relevant, though which he has not yet read (see e.g. Clay [Kelly] 1882, 255n). Yet nowhere in *The Alternative* does Kelly express any familiarity with Hodgson's work—perhaps further emphasising his status as an enthusiastic amateur. In addition, in the closing chapters Kelly himself argues for practicing self-abnegation and, in line with this, ultimately publishes the work anonymously. Given these factors, it seems implausible to say that he read and plagiarised Hodgson's work, to take credit for some novel notion—a notion which, in the grand scheme of the work, carried

⁵ Andersen (2017) describes Hodgson as working with a version of phenomenology which anticipates the methodology of Husserl; Spicker (1973) also provides a detailed comparison of Hodgson and Husserl.

little weight for Kelly. It seems more likely that the two arrived at their respective notions independently.

In the sections to follow I focus specifically on how Kelly puts his methodology to work in analysing our experience of time.

3. Our Experience of Time

Kelly was concerned to draw the reader's attention to features of our experience of time (past/present/future) and temporal series (succession/motion/change) that cry out for further elucidation. For one example, Kelly makes use of a slogan which has, in one form or another, become commonplace in the literature on temporal experience, distinguishing between successive perceptions and the perception of succession/motion.⁶ He says:

"Several successive perceptions, each having for object a part of a motion, however rapidly one may follow another, are not a perception of the motion, and, if a perception of the motion obtain, it must be by means of a modification of consciousness symbolic of the motion. . . ." (Clay [Kelly] 1882, 152)

In essence, we need to do more than merely postulate a succession of experiences if we wish to account for the experience of succession, and Kelly takes as obvious from reflection that we do experience succession, motion, and change.

Andersen and Grush (2009; also see Andersen 2014) suggest that, motivated by our capacity to perceive motion, Kelly credits temporal-interval contents to experience. I agree that there is a sense in which Kelly credits temporal-interval contents to experience when considering our typical experiences of time-series and succession; our ability to perceive motion is *one* key interest for Kelly in these passages. Yet, there are plausibly further issues and motivations at play in Kelly's discussion. At least, as I will demonstrate in what follows, the matter is more complicated than it may seem at first.

⁶See e.g. James (1983, 629); Sellars (1968, 232); and Husserl (1991, 12). See Hoerl (2013) for discussion of how we are to understand what is at issue in slogans of this sort.

3.1. The perception of motion and the specious present

Focusing on our capacity to perceive motion, to begin, one example offered by Kelly is the following:

“Divide the time of any extremely brief visible motion into the five equal parts A B C D E. The motion cannot be seen during the time A, for the parts of it that measure B C D E have not yet obtained. It cannot be seen during the time C, for that which measures the time A has ceased and the parts which measure D E have not yet obtained. It follows the whole of the motion is not immediately visible at any instant whatever, and that the immediate object of perception must be unreal, must be a mental modification serving as vicar or symbol of a remote object, viz., the motion. . . .” Clay [Kelly] (1882, 152)

Drawing the reader’s attention to such passages, Andersen and Grush say that “[l]ike Reid, Kelly recognizes the truth of the following conditional: *if we can perceive motion, then the contents of perception must span a temporal interval*. But where Reid used this conditional with *modus tollens* to deny the claim that we perceive motion, Kelly uses it with *modus ponens* to affirm the claim that the content of our perceptual experience spans a temporal interval” (2009, 296; *emphasis in original*).

For clarity, and to further explain Andersen and Grush’s point, we can signpost some terminology. Kelly describes immediate objects of experience as appearances (see e.g. Clay [Kelly] 1882, 59) and also says that the immediate objects of sense-perception are ‘unreal’ (see e.g. 126). Remote objects, by contrast, are described as “things exterior to consciousness” (100); objects as they are in themselves, whose nature is revealed to ever greater degrees through progress in the natural sciences. Given his use of these terms, through his example of motion occurring from A to E, Kelly appears to be claiming that the subject must be directly aware of an appearance (or ‘a modification of consciousness’), rather than the motion that is exterior to consciousness, in order to perceive motion as occurring. In making this argument, Kelly seems to be assuming that, to perceive the motion from A to E, the very journey from A to E must be presented *simultaneously* (though not presented *as simultaneous*) to conscious awareness. That is, Kelly reasons that the complete journey must be *presented at one and the same time*, though it is presented as a journey over which the object occupies distinct locations *successively*, rather than distinct locations of the object being

presented at successive times. In the latter case one would simply have a series of successive perceptions of the object, rather than a perception of succession.⁷

Yet, it is plausible that Kelly's motivations and interests, when attributing temporal-interval contents to experience, go beyond examples of perceived motion, not least because it is paradoxical and anti-paradoxical experience which Kelly explicitly discusses when considering examples of perceived motion/succession, in sections XCVI to XCIX. The discussion of the specious present comes several sections after the previously outlined example, in section CIV—the two being separated by sections dedicated to the sensible property of causal power, and of life, as well as Kelly's concept of negative knowledge—and it is notable that the discussion of the specious present itself comes and goes without any mention of how it is that we experience succession, motion, or change.

In section CIV Kelly's interests have shifted to the relation of experience to time more generally. In this context, Kelly says that for a time series that only lasts a couple of seconds, we may experience that whole series *as present*. This experienced present is characterised in contrast to the strictly instantaneous "conterminous of the past and future which philosophy denotes by the name Present" (1882, 168). Hence, Kelly distinguishes between the 'present' which we have a conception of from reflection on experience, a sense of 'present' which has duration, and an abstract philosophical conception of 'present,' a sense which is without duration. Giving the title of 'the specious present' to the former notion, Kelly says:

[Experience's] objects are given as being of the present. ... The present to which the datum refers is really a part of the past—a recent past—delusively given as being a time that intervenes between the past and the future. Let it be named the specious present, and let the past that is given as being the past be known as the obvious past. All the notes of a bar of a song seem to the listener to be contained in the present. All the changes of place of a meteor seem to the beholder to be contained in the present. At the instant of the termination of such a series no part of the time measured by them seems to be a past. (1882, 168)

⁷This is to assume something akin to the 'principle of simultaneous awareness,' as discussed by Millar (1984, 109); to this extent, it is tempting to read Kelly as holding an early version of what has been called a retentional model of the specious present, in Dainton's (2022) terms, though Kelly's discussion of paradoxical and anti-paradoxical experience may obscure this somewhat.

From reflection on experience, for Kelly, we have a conception of the past, present, and future. In remembrance we are said to have a past-like quality to experience; in expectation we are said to have a future-like quality to experience; and we also have experience 'given as being a time that intervenes between past and future.' If we accept that, in actual fact, the present is the durationless conterminous of past and future, then—like Kelly—we are committed to saying that: "The specious present is a fiction of experience" (1882, 168). As characterised by Kelly, there appear to be two related senses in which the present of experience is specious. Assuming that 'the present' is in fact durationless, then experience is specious firstly insofar as some *duration* is given as present, and secondly insofar as that which experience presents as being present is really part of the recent past.

In the example of all the notes of a bar of a song seeming to be contained in the present, Kelly's appeal to the specious present appears to be motivated by reflection on a sense in which an interval of time is manifestly given 'as present' in experience (where such presentness can, in retrospect, be contrasted with the past-like quality of remembrance and the future-like quality of expectation). Hence, the appeal to the specious present is not, in this context, seemingly motivated by the need to explain the very possibility of experiencing succession—perhaps some interval of stasis could seem to intervene between past and future in the relevant sense, though this goes beyond anything Kelly explicitly considers. Thus, in contrast to the reading of Kelly attributed to Andersen and Grush, it appears that Kelly did not make accounting for the perception of succession central to his specious present theory (and I argue for this further below, in subsections 3.2. and 3.3).

In summary, Kelly plausibly developed his notion independently of Hodgson's discussion of the empirical present, *and* Kelly motivated appeal to this notion independently of considerations of the possibility of experiencing succession—insofar as the idea of an interval of stasis *as present* would seemingly be sufficient to motivate appeal to the specious present, over and above considerations of experiencing succession. At least, we so far appear to have two distinct motivations which could be behind Kelly's adherence to the claim that our experience spans a temporal interval. First, one may think that the truth of this claim is necessary for the experience of succession, where common sense

dictates that we do experience succession. Call this the motivation from succession; Andersen and Grush appear to interpret Kelly as working with this motivation. Second, the truth of the claim that our experience spans a temporal interval may simply be evidenced in retrospect, where some interval seems temporally present and to be intervening between past and future—as remembered and as anticipated, respectively. Call this the motivation from presentness. In what follows, I will offer further reason for doubting that the motivation from succession is straightforwardly attributable to Kelly, because of how he characterises the notion of paradoxical experience. Elucidating this notion also allows us to focus on some puzzling aspects of appeals to experience of (and at) an instant.

I now turn to consider Kelly's distinction between paradoxical and anti-paradoxical experience, before returning to the specious present (see [subsection 3.3](#)) and the relevance of Kelly's work to contemporary debates ([section 4](#)).

3.2. Paradoxical and anti-paradoxical experience

As much as all of *The Alternative* can fairly be said to have been neglected, even in those works that mention Kelly, his appeal to paradoxical and anti-paradoxical experience is rarely explored (though [Andersen 2014](#) offers a brief gloss, discussed below). Perhaps this is partly because the notions, as operationalised by Kelly, can appear frustratingly obscure. Yet, for Kelly, these notions appear to be of great importance when we reflect on our experience of time-series and motion/change. After outlining Kelly's expressed claims, I will further develop those observations which I take to be of substantive continuing interest—observations which make returning to Kelly's work worthwhile.

When we reflect on our experience of time-series, Kelly says that we can distinguish between two species of experience—paradoxical and anti-paradoxical experience—not as two distinct experiential events, enjoyed at different times or in different situations, but typically as two aspects of one and the same experiential event. In this context, Kelly is interested in how we are to characterise our typical experience of temporal phenomena such as motion and change of location—through his example of seeing the flight of a bird unfold over time—and he is also interested in how we are to characterise the smallest temporal parts of our experience of

such phenomena—i.e., of what “seems to be occurring at the present instant” when watching the bird’s flight (1882, 151). Given the topic of the preceding section, the reader might wonder how such talk of what ‘seems to be occurring at the *present instant*’ meshes with Kelly’s claims about a *duration* seeming to be temporally present. Unfortunately, this is not something Kelly explicitly comments upon—as detailed above, the discussion of the specious present comes several sections after the discussion of the perception of motion in paradoxical and anti-paradoxical experience, with no mention of the latter in the discussion of the former—though reflection on Kelly’s expressed claims, examples, and analogies, can help us to develop a view of what one ought to say (when interpreting Kelly, subsection 3.3, and beyond, section 4). Before turning to this, it is beneficial to first outline how Kelly characterises paradoxical and anti-paradoxical experience, while bracketing considerations of the specious present.

Kelly says that the differentia of paradoxical experience, that by which we can isolate and focus on this aspect of our experience, is that “it apprehends as occurring at an instant what coincides with a divisible time” (1882, 151); thus earning the title of ‘paradoxical.’ That is, Kelly takes there to be a sense in which a time-series, something of a fundamentally temporally extended nature, is experienced as occurring at the present instant, this being paradoxical.

To better elucidate his notion of paradoxical experience, Kelly contrasts it to what he calls anti-paradoxical experience. As an example of the latter, he again appeals to the flight of a bird, now picking out the interval experienced as preceding ‘the present instant’ saying that “[e]xperience of this pre-present part exemplifies the [anti-paradoxical experience]” (1882, 151). Later, Kelly adds: “it is essential to the object of this kind of [anti-paradoxical] experience to include what the subject knows to have ceased to exist, e.g. any pre-present part of a bird’s flight observed during two or three seconds” (153). He suggests that all experience of time-series—except for those that are extremely brief—consists of *both* the paradoxical and anti-paradoxical experience (see 151). Hence, in the example of the flight of the bird, some divisible part of the flight is experienced as occurring at the present instant, and this exemplifies paradoxical experience; additionally, some greater temporal part of the flight is experienced as unfolding over an interval of time preceding the

present instant, and this exemplifies anti-paradoxical experience. (Again, how these notions are related to, and consistent with, the notion of the specious present is an issue I will return to.)

What exactly does the notion of paradoxical experience amount to? In the example of watching the flight of a bird, Kelly says—regarding paradoxical experience—that: “*a part of the flight seems to be occurring at the present instant*” and in such cases there is “*a series given as occurring at the present instant*”; hence, as emphasised above, such experience is paradoxical “because it apprehends as occurring at an instant *what coincides with a divisible time*” (1882, 151; *emphasis added*). It reads as though Kelly’s interests are broadly phenomenological; he is concerned with how things seem to the subject, and the objects of experience, across such examples. Given the examples and explanations he offers, it appears Kelly is claiming that paradoxical experiences are experiences where we are presented with something which essentially occurs *over time*, such as motion and change of location, and yet where there is a sense in which this is presented *as occurring at an instant*. Hence, I take the interesting distinction Kelly is highlighting, between paradoxical and anti-paradoxical experience, to be something like the following. The anti-paradoxical experience is said to be of some time-series—e.g. some portion of the bird’s flight—and this time-series is presented as taking place over some interval of time. The object of paradoxical experience is that portion of the bird’s flight, something which essentially unfolds over time, which is given as occurring *at an instant*.

Given what has been said, one may worry about the cogency of the ideas being expressed by Kelly. Is his discussion simply confused, and is an appeal to the *present instant* of experience to abandon the appeal to some *temporally extended present* experience? (In other words, if we appeal to paradoxical experience, is the specious present to be jettisoned?) Are we to understand Kelly’s anti-paradoxical experience merely in terms of some suitable series of experienced instants—paradoxical experiences—strung together, one after the other? Divorced from the issue of whether or not Kelly provides a coherent picture, if we find plausible the idea that we can appeal to something like the motion/change we are experiencing as occurring *at an instant*, this being akin to Kelly’s paradoxical experience, is such an appeal inconsistent with also appealing to the specious present? Plausibly not, on all accounts. That these interpretations mischaracterise

Kelly can, I believe, be appreciated through considering an analogy that he offers; this analogy also helps to show what may be accurate, and what may be inaccurate, in the single existing interpretation of Kelly's paradoxical and anti-paradoxical experience in the literature.

On Andersen's (2014, 30) reading of Kelly, paradoxical experience occurs when one *now* experiences temporally extended things as temporally extended; where such experience reverts to being anti-paradoxical, veridical experience of existent objects, once completely past. We genuinely experienced the movement of genuinely moving things, but only once both movement and experience are no longer present; we cannot experience such things veridically as they occur. I think that this gets something correct, in how some aspect of our experience is said to be paradoxical when experiencing something as temporally extended and yet as occurring at the present instant, but it cannot be the whole story of how we are to understand these notions as operationalised by Kelly. To see why, consider how Kelly explains the relation between anti-paradoxical experience and paradoxical experience by analogy with the relation between a crayon picture and a pencil point, respectively.

Each [i.e., paradoxical experience and the pencil point] modifies what it acts upon, and the series of its actions is the antecedent and cause of a modification different from what is caused by any unit of the series, in the one case a picture, in the other the object of an anti-paradoxical experience: a single impact of the pencil point causes a dot, not a picture; a single bearing of the paradoxical experience causes not the object of the anti-paradoxical experience, nor one resembling it, but an object resembling a minute part of it. (1882, 153)

Here we do not seem to have a simple distinction between experience presenting a shorter and a greater temporal interval—i.e., the distinction here is not supposed to simply be one of scale, such that paradoxical experience is merely some small chunk of anti-paradoxical experience. Nor is the claim that anti-paradoxical experience is *merely* a series of paradoxical experiences strung together. Similarly, we do not seem to have a simple distinction between experiencing a temporally extended occurrence as occurring *now* (in paradoxical experience) and as *completely past* (in anti-paradoxical experience), as Andersen suggests. To use Kelly's analogy, the distinction is between a dot and a picture, and not between a picture and a smaller part of that picture, where the smaller part could also be considered something of a picture in its own right. Kelly stresses

that a single bearing of the paradoxical experience does not resemble the anti-paradoxical experience, just as a pencil dot does not resemble a picture. Though it seems apt to say that, in the case of anti-paradoxical experience, *unlike* paradoxical experience, we are experientially aware of something which seems temporally extended and which seems to be *occurring over a temporal extent*. Hence the former not being paradoxical.

The reader might protest that Kelly's appeal to the notion of paradoxical experience remains frustratingly obscure. An additional frustration is that Kelly concludes his discussion of paradoxical and anti-paradoxical experience before he turns to discuss the specious present, and the three notions are never explicitly discussed together. As a result, the reader isn't provided with a straightforward picture of how to make Kelly's appeal to the 'present instant' of experience (when characterising paradoxical experience), and the "larger present of which the present instant seems to be the term" (1882, 151; when characterising anti-paradoxical experience), consistent with his appeal to the 'specious present'.

Moving beyond Kelly's expressed claims, in what follows I propose one reading of what precisely talk of 'paradoxical experience' is plausibly gesturing towards, and how (so understood) paradoxical and anti-paradoxical experience can be understood with reference to the specious present. On the reading being offered, I return to further demonstrate how Kelly can be understood as motivating appeal to the specious present independently of considerations of the experience of succession.

3.3. Paradoxical experience, anti-paradoxical experience, and the specious present

Let's return to Kelly's description of the experience of the bird's flight. In considering this example, Kelly appears to suggest that at any given time we can become aware in retrospect—however fleetingly—of what seems to be the *latest* instant of what we are so experiencing. In such retrospect, he also says that the minimum we are aware of seems to be some divisible part of the bird's flight. That is, it is granted that we can sensibly inquire about what we are experientially aware of as seeming to occur at an instant, and what we are so experientially aware of is, he says, not something which is itself instantaneous—hence this aspect of experience being labelled paradoxical. For Kelly, an awareness

of something instantaneous would presumably be akin to an awareness a static presentation of the bird's location at a time, rather than some portion of its flight; yet, at the experiential instant he says we are aware of some divisible portion of the bird's movement.

In making the above claims regarding paradoxical experience, it is unclear whether Kelly is motivated solely by the need to explain the perception of succession and motion, rather than appealing to a series of perceptions of static states of affairs at instants, or whether he takes paradoxical experience to be something that we simply become aware of in retrospect. Regardless, he says that this is not *all* that we are aware of in retrospect. In appealing to anti-paradoxical experience he also suggests that we are aware of some temporally extended part of the series of the bird's movements, which seems to be unfolding over some interval of time—where one *knows* this to have ceased to exist, though this is not how it *seems*, since this temporally extended series “seems to be contained in a *larger present* of which the present instant seems to be the term” (1882, 151; *emphasis added*).

Anti-paradoxical experience, as characterised, sounds very much like the experience we are said to have over the span of the specious present. In each case Kelly says that we know that this temporally extended object of experience must really be part of the past, but this does not prevent him from holding that we are nonetheless experientially presented with a temporally extended object and one which *seems to be temporally present*—to intervene between past and future.

The identification of anti-paradoxical experience with the span of the specious present is made textually plausible by Kelly's characterization of anti-paradoxical experience in terms of the experience of a series which, if it does not exceed a few seconds, ‘seems to be contained in a larger present’—i.e., *larger than* the present instant, which seems to be the term. The appeal to paradoxical experience is best understood, on this reading, as being motivated by an attempt to tease out what the experiencing subject is *minimally* temporally aware of—the latest, most recent instant of that extended interval which is speciously presented as being temporally present. Kelly accepts that we can reflect—however fleetingly—on what we are experientially aware of as occurring at *the present instant*, and the most fine-grained distinction we can draw in our awareness of the bird's flight is some divisible portion of that flight.

On the reading of Kelly outlined, his proposal is especially relevant to recent work on temporal experience in highlighting one key motivation behind an appeal to the specious present (discussed below), and in elucidating one way—consistent with the specious present—of conceptualising of experiential instants (discussed in [section 4](#)). It has been claimed that ‘specious present theories’—i.e., those making use of an appeal to a temporally extended interval presented in ongoing perceptual experience—are solely, or mostly, motivated by the need to account for the perception of motion and change (see [Prosser 2016](#)). Taking the specious present and anti-paradoxical experience to be two sides of the same coin leaves us in a position to see how Kelly is best understood as motivating appeal to the specious present somewhat independently of considerations of the motivation from succession. (Though this is not to say that considerations of the experience of succession are entirely irrelevant, for Kelly, since it is in considering such cases that he appeals to the notion of anti-paradoxical experience. The important point to note is that this is not his only—perhaps not his main—motivation in appealing to a temporally extended present in experience.)

I have offered reasons for thinking that the specious present is not synonymous with Kelly’s paradoxical experience, and is more likely synonymous with anti-paradoxical experience. Yet Kelly insists that *there is* such paradoxical experience and that, through such experience, there is experience of motion at the present instant. Hence, with paradoxical and anti-paradoxical experience having been introduced, Kelly has (he believes) accounted for the experience of motion/change—in the former case, in terms of experience apprehending “as occurring at an instant what coincides with a divisible time” (1882, 151). At this stage, no further work or theoretical posits are required to explain the possibility of experiencing succession. And yet, on the basis of reflection on experience, Kelly *does* take there to be an additional role for a temporally extended present when characterising our experience and, just as significantly, Kelly’s appeal to the specious present makes no mention of the need to account for the experience of succession. Instead, in the relevant passages Kelly was seemingly motivated simply by reflection on a phenomenological sense in which some extended portion of a time series *seems* temporally present, *seems* to intervene between past and future; where this is

specious insofar as one takes there to be, as a matter of fact, a strictly instantaneous present moment dividing past from future.

If the above proposal is consistent with and clarifies some of Kelly's claims, then—the reader might suggest—it is a wonder that anti-paradoxical experience was not more explicitly identified with the specious present by Kelly himself. This is a fair point, but it should be noted that *whatever* the relation between the specious present and anti-paradoxical experience (and paradoxical experience), it is a wonder—and a shame—that this was not more explicitly commented upon, regardless of whether Kelly would have ultimately drawn the comparisons/contrasts recommended herein. However, the interpretation of Kelly I have provided makes available one explanation for the lack of such an explicit discussion: the 'specious present' was not introduced as a significant term which was then to do further explanatory work for Kelly—i.e., the motivation from presentness, and not from succession, was behind the introduction of this terminology.

To summarise: the notions doing explanatory work, in characterising our experience of time-series, are paradoxical and anti-paradoxical experience—and while we can experience time series in paradoxical experience, appeal to this notion alone is not adequate to account for all aspects of our temporal experience. By the point at which Kelly is appealing to the specious present, his discussion of the relation of time and experience is ending. He appears, in these passages, to be more concerned about the relation of our experience of time to time itself—i.e., past, present, and future—rather than how we are to characterise our experience of time-series—i.e., motion and change. The specious present is introduced as a label for a datum revealed in retrospect on our experience, that experience presents some interval as *temporally present*. Even though, on the reading offered herein, these notions are intimately related—insofar as the span of anti-paradoxical experience has been identified with the span of the specious present—this is one reason why it might not have occurred to Kelly to link the notion of the specious present back to his previously discussed notions of paradoxical and anti-paradoxical experience, regrettable though it is.

Supposing the above is well and good, what makes all of this worthwhile? Why return to the work of an amateur philosopher and the obscure terminology he employs when discussing our experience of

time? (Over and above the desire to address the lack of any pre-existing substantive discussion of Kelly in the literature.) In our current context, not least because a (perhaps charitable) development of Kelly's ideas is pertinent to debates about temporal experience which are live today; to which I now turn.

4. The Value of Returning to Kelly

I indicated at the outset that Kelly's ideas are especially relevant to contemporary discussions of temporal experience, given recent expressions of sympathy towards views of perceptual experience over time which are construed in terms of a series of instantaneous, experiential snapshots. So called 'dynamic snapshot models' (DSMs) of perceptual experience over time can be understood in comparison and contrast to Reid. Reid (2002) is typically characterised as holding that no kind of succession can be experienced, because the operations of sensation/consciousness are limited to the present instant. Like Reid, proponents of DSMs hold that the contents of experience are confined to an instant; unlike Reid, they do not thereby deny that we perceive motion and change. To avoid the latter commitment, they construe experience over time as being constituted by a sequence of experiential snapshots, each of which may have 'vector-like content,' a feature which adds dynamism—i.e., a motion/change-like phenomenology—to each individual snapshot (see Prosser 2016). In addition to revealing distinct motivations behind an appeal to an interval invariably presented in perceptual experience, Kelly's ideas remain relevant because of the consideration he gives to experiential intervals and instants, and their relationship.

Given the presentation of Kelly's claims thus far, it might be initially tempting to suppose that he is ultimately sympathetic to something akin to a DSM—despite coining the terminology of the specious present—insofar as he appeals to the notion of paradoxical experience, as instantaneous experience of objects as moving and changing. Granted, the characterisation offered of paradoxical experience can appear superficially similar to some claims made by recent proponents of DSMs of temporal experience, but taken altogether I believe Kelly's ideas are more antagonistic to than supportive of such models, as I outline in what follows.

There are three individually plausible phenomenologically-driven claims which appear to be behind (at least some of) what Kelly says concerning our temporal experience, which it is useful to distinguish between for present purposes. First, there is the claim that we seem to be presented with some interval of time as temporally present; as intervening between past and future. (This, I have suggested, is Kelly's motivation for appealing to the specious present.) Second, there is the claim that, in reflection on experience, we can grasp something like an experiential instant, or that which we experience as occurring at the most recent instant. (This is plausibly behind the appeal to 'the present instant' in Kelly's discussion of paradoxical experience.) Third, there is the claim that even the minimum of experience of a moving object—such as an instantaneous part of one's experience of a bird's flight—presents some movement. (This is plausibly behind the appeal to 'experiencing a series at an instant' in Kelly's discussion of paradoxical experience.)

The second and third of the above claims might be taken to together provide some intuitive support for DSMs, insofar as one supposes that making these two claims is inconsistent with (or in some other way undercuts) making the first claim. For example, some theorists (i.e., those offering DSMs) question whether, in accepting that there is a phenomenology of motion/change at an instant, we undercut the very motivation for so appealing to the specious present. On the flip-side, other theorists (i.e., those antagonistic to DSMs) might wonder whether we can really make sense of how there can be motion-like phenomenology—something of a fundamentally temporal nature—at an instant. Though these worries may come from opposing sides, Kelly's proposal allows us to dissolve both.

Kelly certainly wishes to maintain all three claims. While appealing to an interval being presented in experience as spanning between past and future, Kelly also appeals to something like an introspectively salient instant of experience; in doing so, Kelly suggests that even at this instant we seem to be presented with some motion occurring. Reflecting on Kelly's analogy of the pencil point and the picture, it becomes evident that there is only conflict between these three plausible claims if we make a slip in our reasoning, and make the unargued-for assumption that a characterisation of how things are for the subject is homogenous down to instants. If we do not make this assumption, no conflict is

reached among our plausible claims from Kelly—and it is plausible that Kelly also warned against this, in suggesting that it is the series, rather than a unit of the series, which is ‘the antecedent,’ in his analogy of the pencil point and the picture.

To put the point another way, while it may initially sound paradoxical to talk of the appearance of motion at an instant, the air of any paradox dissipates when we recognise that we have motion at the instant in virtue of having it *over the interval* preceding/subsuming the interval. Compare to how talk of the appearance of a colour at an unextended point might sound paradoxical, until we say that such a colour is presented at the unextended point in virtue of being presented across some extent within which the point falls. Thus, conflict between the three claims only arises if we assume that how things are for the subject over some interval is to be cashed out in terms of how things are for the subject at the instants that fall within the interval, and there is no inconsistency if we hold that what is presented in experience as occurring over the specious present—i.e., in anti-paradoxical experience—has some metaphysical and explanatory priority over what is presented as occurring at instants falling within those intervals. This is how we are to make sense of an appeal to an instant of experience, and such an instant of experience presenting motion/change, without pressure to abandon an appeal to the specious present.⁸

Abstracting away from Kelly, the suggested lesson for contemporary debates is as follows. We need not deny that there is a role for something like the present instant of experience, where this is consistent with an appeal to the specious present (which is independently motivated by reflection on experience), as long as we hold that the present instant of experience has the character that it does in virtue of the character of one’s experience over the interval of time within which the instant falls. To lend Kelly’s terms, the character of one’s anti-paradoxical experience, over the specious present, is antecedent to the character of one’s paradoxical experience. Thus, through developing ideas already present in Kelly, we find the recipe to eat our cake and have it too. In taking what is presented in experience over an interval to have metaphysical and explanatory priority over what is presented as occurring at instants falling within

⁸On the explanatory and metaphysical priority of intervals of experience over instants therein, see Soteriou (2013) and Phillips (2014).

that interval, we can accommodate each of the three plausible claims: that an interval is presented in experience as temporally present; that there is, in phenomenological reflection, a role for something like an experiential instant; and that the minimum of experience of an object moving itself presents some movement.

5. Concluding Remarks

A reader ought to be interested in revisiting Kelly's presentation of the specious present, and the distinction between paradoxical and anti-paradoxical experience, because these notions get to the heart of the difficult issue—prevalent in contemporary debates—of how we are to begin to characterise what it is we want to make sense of when we turn our attention to temporal experience. As well as outlining the relevance of Kelly's ideas for contemporary work in temporal experience, in revisiting Kelly's work I have offered an explanation of how we get two theorists—Hodgson and Kelly—individually motivating similar notions—the empirical and specious present—at the end of the nineteenth century. In addition, the present paper provides a new reading of an understudied figure, thereby addressing a gap in the literature on the history of the specious present and temporal experience more generally.

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