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Dunbar's Challenge to Dynamic Metaphysics

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Abstract:

Dunbar, the character from Joseph Heller's novel *Catch-22*, tries to extend his life by making it boring. I use Dunbar's case to pose a challenge to those who think our phenomenology gives us reason to defend time's passage as a metaphysical view. I argue that the reason phenomenology gives for us to defend time's passage cannot be that our brains detect time's passage, unless we take Dunbar's metaphysics more seriously than it deserves. Instead we must resort to the ordinary practice of trying to make sense of things in order to reach such a metaphysically substantive view.

Dunbar, the character from Joseph Heller's novel *Catch-22*, is desperate to prolong his life. He hits upon a strategy: he will live as boring a life as he can. Time passes more slowly when you are bored, he reasons, so a day during which he is constantly bored will take longer than one during which he is excited. If he only has n days left to live, those n days will take longer if he is bored.

Dunbar is deluded. This strategy will not mean he lives longer. Days merely seem to pass more slowly when you are bored. Dunbar is confusing how time *seems* to him with how things *really are*. If it even makes sense to think of there being a rate at which time passes, such a rate would be unaffected by an individual's mood.² This, I take it, is what most metaphysicians would say in response to Dunbar's case. Such metaphysicians would come in two sorts, however. Some metaphysicians believe talk of time's passage is at best a metaphor, and any associated phenomenology should be investigated by psychologists, but does not give us an insight to a dynamic temporal aspect of reality. Such metaphysicians defend a 'static' view of time.³ Other metaphysicians think that talk of the passage of

¹ Thanks to audiences at the Joint Session in Cambridge, Keele, Kent, and The Philosophy of Time Society session of the Vancouver APA meeting for helpful comments on this paper.

² See Markosian (1993) for a discussion of this issue.

³ I have in mind here figures like Huw Price, Heather Dyke, L.A. Paul, L. Nathan Oaklander, D.H. Mellor, Simon Prosser, Robin Le Poidevin, David Lewis, and many others.

time is not a metaphor, and that presentness, pastness, and futurity are objective and changing features of reality. Such metaphysicians defend a dynamic metaphysics.⁴

This paper uses Dunbar's strategy to pose a challenge to dynamic views of time. The challenge is this:

Why is Dunbar's appeal to phenomenology a mistake, but the dynamic metaphysician's appeal to phenomenology is a reason to place time at the centre of our metaphysics?

The challenge is, I think, fairly intuitive: one group of people should not castigate others for reading metaphysics into phenomenology and, in the same breath, castigate another group for paying insufficient attention to their phenomenology when it comes to constructing one's metaphysics, unless, of course, they explain where the relevant difference lies. Defenders of dynamic metaphysics seem to be placed in just such a position: they castigate Dunbar for taking his experience when bored to reveal a change in the flow of time, but castigate the defenders of a static metaphysics for not taking our phenomenology as a compelling reason to accept a dynamic metaphysics.⁵ More optimistically, if defenders of a dynamic metaphysics can offer a compelling response to Dunbar's challenge, this will allow them to more clearly articulate their objection to defenders of a static metaphysics; they can say in what respects defenders of a static metaphysics are misguided in ignoring phenomenology. I will argue for a strong response to this challenge: there are no *features* of phenomenology that can allow us to discriminate between time passing and time not passing, and no features of phenomenology that cannot be explained on a view on which time doesn't pass. The relation between phenomenology and time's passage this: we can best make sense of our experience if we subscribe to a metaphysical hypothesis that time passes.

This paper has three sections. In section 1, I propose one answer to where the difference between Dunbar's view and dynamic metaphysics lies: a dynamic metaphysics aims to make much more general claims than Dunbar does. In section 2, I consider Prosser's view that a dynamic metaphysics claims that time's passage is something that we can detect – that our phenomenology provides perceptual evidence for—or that there is a one-to-one mapping between perceptual character and features of the world such that our phenomenology can be mapped to time's passing.⁶ I argue that, if a dynamic metaphysics did require such a view, that view would compare poorly to Dunbar's view, rather than

⁴ I have in mind here figures like Dean Zimmerman, Craig Bourne, Storrs McCall, Ned Markosian, Meghan Sullivan, Jonathan Tallant, and myself, as well as many more.

⁵ It should be noted that a number of defenders of static views do take our phenomenology as a reason to prefer a dynamic metaphysics, but one that is defeated by other factors. E.g. D.H. Mellor and Robin Le Poidevin

⁶ Prosser (2013a; 2013b)

appearing more plausible. I shall show that, whatever positive reasons there are for thinking time passes, they are not that we perceive – in the narrow sense of ‘perceive’ that Prosser requires – that time passes. In section 3, I will consider the relationship that the very general claims of a dynamic metaphysics have to our experience, if experience isn’t supposed to be providing perceptual evidence (in Prosser’s sense) for those claims.

1: General Claims and Captain Dunbar

I want to start by considering some reasons why we should not take Dunbar seriously. The main reason living a boring life doesn’t make you live longer is that the effect is private. Two people can listen to the same talk, at the same time, in the same room, and one person can feel like the talk is taking ages, and the other can feel it is going by far too quickly. If the phenomenology of these individuals was a guide to how fast time was passing, then either that phenomenology would be unreliable, or time would be passing at different rates for each of them. Either phenomenology does not licence Dunbar to draw those metaphysical conclusions about the nature of time, or it allows Dunbar to draw conclusions about time which don’t generalise very far – perhaps only to time-for-him. So either Dunbar is not entitled to make metaphysical claims on the basis of his phenomenology, or the metaphysical claims he is entitled to are *very* local in character. Perhaps this would not bother Dunbar, who, after all, is interested in living longer, rather than doing metaphysics. Dunbar may only care about whether he gets more time-for-Dunbar, even if he lives no longer by other people’s lights. And if that is what Dunbar cares about, then I don’t wish to argue with him. My interest is in time, rather than time-for-Dunbar. So, henceforth, when I consider an argument from Dunbar’s phenomenology, I will be treating Dunbar as if he were making metaphysical claims about *time* on the basis of the experience, rather than merely trying to extend time-for-Dunbar.

Metaphysical claims, it seems, whatever else they are, are usually very *general* claims, so coming to a conclusion about the nature of time-for-Dunbar may not be general enough to count as a metaphysical conclusion at all. Both those who defend dynamic metaphysics, and those who defend static metaphysics, seem to be interested in making claims of a metaphysical character. Indeed they seem to be interested in making very general claims about whether or not time passes; theirs is not a dispute about whether time passes from any particular perspective, but of whether time passes if we abstract away from a particular perspective as much as we are able. Defenders of a dynamic metaphysics think

that our most general attempt to make sense of the world will involve an appeal to the passage of time, and defenders of static metaphysics deny this.⁷

In responding to Dunbar's challenge, then, defenders of a dynamic metaphysics can show how they are different from Captain Dunbar. To the extent they can make a case that their view is maximally general, they are not subject to criticism in the way Dunbar is for thinking that very local and particular facts about phenomenology can licence metaphysical conclusions. In the next section I want to argue that arguments that we perceive time's passage (arguments often made by defenders of a dynamic metaphysics) lead the defender of dynamic metaphysics into a trap. If they accept that time's passage is something that we can detect or that features of our phenomenology can be mapped one-to-one to time's passing, they make Dunbar's view superior to a standard dynamic metaphysics. Since Dunbar is deluded, we should not accept that.

2: Do we perceive time's passage?

In the previous section I argued that defenders of a dynamic metaphysics were different from Dunbar because of the generality of their claims. In this section I wish to show that their claims are not 'read off their phenomenology' in the problematic way Dunbar's might be.

Many philosophers have offered arguments that we should reject claims that the passage of time is part of the representational content, or the phenomenal character of experience.⁸ I will look, in particular, at two arguments by Simon Prosser, one from indiscriminability (the weaker argument), and one from the uniqueness of perceptual relations (the stronger argument). Prosser's arguments, combined, are supposed to lead to the conclusion that the passage of time is not only illusory, but also unintelligible. In discussing these two arguments I aim to do two things: I will argue that Dunbar comes off better than a standard dynamic metaphysics on both arguments if we accept Prosser's premises, and I will argue that a dynamic metaphysics is perfectly intelligible if we reject the claims that the relationship between experience and metaphysics is what Prosser assumes it is. In the next section I will discuss how defenders of a dynamic metaphysics should think of time's passage.

Let's begin with Prosser's argument from indiscriminability. Prosser argues against views which take experience to provide perceptual evidence for time's passage, after the manner that we perceive that

⁷ The idea that metaphysics is the 'most general attempt to make sense of things' has been defended by Moore (2012).

⁸ Paul (2010); Callendar (2012); Skow (2011), Dainton (2011; 2012) Prosser (2007; 2013a; 2013b). Skow considers a version of the link between passage and experience – the Argument from Presented Experience – which is along the lines of the argument I will endorse later.

a ripe tomato in front of us is red.⁹ He argues that experience doesn't favour such views over the view that time does not pass. The relationship between our phenomenology and the very general claims of a dynamic metaphysics is, I argue, not the sort of relationship that holds between our phenomenology and the claim 'I am wet' or 'that is red'. We should not expect that sort of experience to favour the view that time passes.

In brief Prosser's argument from indiscriminability goes like this:

1. For phenomenology to have x as part of its phenomenal character, the brain must be able to act as a *detector* for x.¹⁰
 2. To act as a detector for x is to have a capacity to discriminate between cases where x is present (or obtains) and cases where x is not present (or does not obtain)
 3. The brain cannot act as a detector for the passage of time
- C. Therefore the passage of time cannot be part of the phenomenal character of experience.

The thought here is that if the feature of the world we are purported to be having an experience of changes, the phenomenal character we experience should not remain unchanged if the feature of the world in question is part of the content of our experience. If you are looking at a ripe tomato, you have a certain experience, and, typically, if I remove the ripe tomato then the phenomenal character of your experience changes. In order to experience a ripe tomato, according to Prosser, it is required that your experience changes based on whether your brain is affected by the presence or absence of the tomato. Likewise if you are to experience time's passage, your brain should be affected by the presence or absence time's passage.

Let's assume that a dynamic metaphysics is right: ours is a Universe where time passes. Unless we hold something like Dunbar's view, our brain could not respond to the presence or absence of such passage. Passage goes on when we are not detecting it, and when we detect anything at all, passage is going on. Indeed, given that we're in a Universe in which time passes, if time were to stop passing, our brain wouldn't respond, because *nothing of any kind* would happen. On a dynamic metaphysics, any sort of change at all is dependent on time passing. Dunbar would do better than a standard Dynamic metaphysics, however. Dunbar thinks his brain can discriminate between cases where time passes

⁹ (2013b), p.162

¹⁰ The word 'detector' is from Prosser, though he does not use it in his (2013a), or (2013b). The idea of the brain acting as a detector, if not by that name, does appear in both places, however.

slowly and where time does not pass slowly (but passes more quickly). On that basis, his brain can respond to changes in time's passage, because the relevant changes are local phenomena that differ in different situations, like the presence or absence of ripe tomatoes. It is because the defender of dynamic metaphysics doesn't typically think the passage of time is to be thought of as local that means they should reject Prosser's characterisation of the relation between experience and time's passage.

Perhaps there is another way to understand Prosser's argument. Previously, I assumed that time passes, and showed that time ceasing to pass would not cause our brain to respond. Perhaps Prosser wants to compare the difference in our brains between a Universe in which time passed and one in which it didn't. He might argue that our experience would be just the same on either view. This seems to confuse an indicative with a counterfactual, however. If time passes, the counterfactual 'were time not to pass we would have the same experience' is false, because if the defender of dynamic metaphysics is right, there would be no experience, nor activity of any kind, were time not to pass. If time doesn't pass (in anything more than a metaphorical sense) it is unclear what experience would be like if time did pass, because it would be unclear what such a view would be.¹¹ In the debate about the relationship between time's passage and experience, we start off with the datum that we have the experience we have, and offer competing explanations of that experience. Prosser is denying that we experience the passage of time, because it doesn't act like a local perceptual phenomenon, but if we consider a view on which it does—Dunbar's view—this is less palatable than a standard dynamic metaphysics.

Let's consider Prosser's stronger argument. Prosser argues that in order to perceive a feature of the world there must be a “one-to-one mapping of phenomenal characters of perceptual states to perceived features”.¹² Again the argument has as its target views that there is something it is like, some *feature* of our experience that can be called a perception of time's passage. For the same reasons as given above, we should not think that there is a feature of experience we can separate out as being a *perception* of time's passage, if time's passage is necessary for any experience. We might have experiences that give rise to our being really struck by the transitory nature of things—deadlines looming, it being Christmas again already, the *aurora borealis* flitting about the night sky—but these don't satisfy Prosser's requirement that perceptions have a "differential influence on the configuration of the brain", corresponding to the influence local phenomena (like green triangles) have.¹³ This includes a variety

¹¹ This amounts to the claim that if time does not actually pass, it necessarily does not.

¹² (2013a), p.72

¹³ (2013a), p.76

of ways experience might be thought to involve perceptions of time's passage, including that change is experienced as having a 'dynamic nature', and that passage '*infuses*' all experiences.

If it is the experienced dynamicity of change that is our perceiving of time's passage then we would need to connect *that* feature of experience *rather than other features of experience* with time's passage. But that would involve treating time's passage as far too local—that time's passage was only responsible for feelings of fleetingness, rather than for our being able to perceive things at all. Dunbar acts as though experiences of fleetingness are perceptions of time's passage, and other factors, like clocks, and the events around him aren't relevant. On Dunbar's preferred metaphysics, the feeling of fleetingness *does* give a one-to-one mapping of features of experience to features of the world. By Prosser's lights Dunbar is doing better, but that is just a *reductio* of Prosser's views on the relation we should expect between experience and times passage.

If, Prosser argues, we think perception of passage infuses all experience that amounts to denying that there is any such thing as phenomenology of time passing at all, since none of it is a *perception of time passing*. I think we should accept Prosser's claim. We have no *perceptions* of time passing, but we have lots of experiences that incline us to report that it seems like something is the case that don't meet Prosser's requirements to count as *perceptions*. Consider, for instance, a bird flying behind a tree and appearing on the other side. Our brain does not detect the *identity* of the bird before flying behind the tree and the bird after – just think of the many magic tricks that exploit our tendency to think two similar looking things are in fact identical. Nonetheless, it is on the basis of our experience that we are inclined to say that the bird flying behind the tree is the same as the bird appearing from behind it. If someone were to ask 'why do you say it was the same bird?' we would presumably appeal to experience: 'I just saw it fly behind the tree!'. Nonetheless, we can't provide an account of the 'differential configuration of the brain' between a case when we have seen a magic trick, and a case where the bird really did fly behind the tree. Prosser concludes on the basis of his argument that time's passage is an illusion, but we should no more do that than we should conclude on the basis that there are illusionists with multiple similar pigeons that persistence through time is an illusion. We cannot perceive sameness of identity, but experience is what we appeal to when we try to explain why we think something has persisted.

If we accept that there are ways experience can lead us to believe things besides perceiving them, as Prosser uses the term, the defender of a dynamic metaphysics should not disagree with Prosser's argument. This is because the defender of a dynamic metaphysics would be *less* able to respond to

Dunbar's challenge if they thought that the brain's ability to detect the passage of time was relevant, than if they thought, as I argue they should, that that passage of time is something we could not in principle perceive (in Prosser's sense). It is not ruled out by Prosser's argument, then, that Dunbar's phenomenology could have time's passing more slowly as part of the phenomenal character of his experience when he is bored.

Dunbar thinks he is in a position to perceive (in Prosser's sense) differences in the rate of time's passing, but the defender of a dynamic view will reject that. But if what the dynamic metaphysician were trying to discriminate between were cases where time passed and cases where it didn't, then, it is clear, the defender of a dynamic metaphysics would be unable to perceive time's passage at all since they could not isolate a feature of their experience as being uniquely temporal. According to the defender of a dynamic metaphysics, *all* awareness is awareness of time's passing. So, if we thought that the positive reason for thinking time passes was that time's passage was part of the phenomenal character of experience (such that our brains detected time's passage), Dunbar would be in a *better* position than the defender of dynamic metaphysics! Far from responding to Dunbar's challenge, such a position makes it much more difficult to respond to.

The defender of a dynamic metaphysics, then, should think that attempts to perceive time's passage (in Prosser's sense) are anathema to their project. This is not just true of Prosser's formulation of the argument, but true of the general project of trying to show that time's passage is something we can 'read off experience' because of some special feature it has. If time's passage were the sort of thing we could perceive, because we could have some (coherent) experiences with it, and some without, we should either dismiss time's passage, along with Dunbar's deluded view of the world, as confusing how things seem with how they really are, or, if working brains could be differentially influenced passage under similar circumstances, we should treat it as something to be detected by physicists, like gravity. It is clear, however, that most defenders of dynamic metaphysics don't think that time's passage should be dismissed like Dunbar's view, and don't think that time's passage is something to be detected, like gravity, by physicists with expensive equipment.¹⁴

Prosser does concede that there are other options for the defender of time's passage. He says, "At best it might be argued that passage is an essential element of all physical causation; but this would

¹⁴ Clocks measure time's passage (if it passes), but they do not count as detecting it, since they don't discriminate between time's passing and not passing, for the same reasons our brains do not.

apply to all phenomenal characters equally”.¹⁵ Elsewhere he says "At most, the passage of time would be a kind of 'background' or 'enabling' condition, necessary for causation to be possible at all".¹⁶

I think this is the approach the dynamic metaphysician should accept. Since Prosser's claim that passage is unintelligible is restricted to the sort of thing that might be an perceivable, in his sense, then the claim that passage is unintelligible refers only to something I argue that a defender of dynamic metaphysics should not be interested in defending. I will argue, in the next section, that we can still make sense of a relationship between experience and time's passage, but without thinking metaphysics collapses into describing phenomenology, rather than ontology.

3: From Phenomenology to Passage

In section 2, I argued that a defender of a dynamic view should accept that our brains do not detect or perceive passage (in Prosser's sense). It seems clear, however, that there is widely thought to be *some* relationship between time's passage and experience, such that Paul, Callender, Dainton, Prosser, and others feel the need to argue against such a connection. In this section I will discuss that connection, and also respond to an objection that dynamic metaphysics is merely describing our experience, and not genuinely doing metaphysics.

If we examine our experience closely, we note a number of features that seem to be associated with time. Things seem to move and change. We anticipate some things, remember others, and, indeed, remember anticipating some things and anticipate remembering others. In each of these cases we might come up with things that our brain detects. Imagine we are playing a simple ball game: your ability to catch the ball depends on your detecting that the ball is moving, being able to anticipate its position, and, perhaps, anticipating the momentum of the ball based on a memory of its heft. These features of experience are disputed by very few people, and are accepted by defenders both of static and of dynamic metaphysics. None of these are perceptions of time passing in the relevant sense. The question is whether those features are best explained by a dynamic metaphysics or a static metaphysics. Neither metaphysics, as such, is to be found in those experiences, precisely because a metaphysics make claims of a generality that goes beyond a single individual's experience, as I argued in section 1.

¹⁵ (2013b), p.162

¹⁶ (2013a), p.76

Skow (2011) considers an argument for the connection between presentness and experience along these lines. I will take it that a view on which there is objective presentness is on which time passes. Skow says:

“Nowhere does the argument say that things look present, or that the passage of time is represented by some experience. And nowhere does the argument say that presentness makes a difference to how experiences feel. It does not say that experiences with presentness have some special phenomenal character. The argument does have this much in common with the argument from phenomenology: it says that experiences with presentness are special. But instead of saying that they feel different this argument says that experiences with presentness are the only ones available to me.”¹⁷

This is the line I think a dynamic metaphysics should pursue, if it is to successfully avoid Dunbar’s challenge. Each experience we have is an experience of time passing. As such, time’s passage will be a feature of all phenomenal characters equally. This line of argument should be common across a number of metaphysical claims that we would not make unless we had the sort of experience we in fact have. Such claims might include the existence of an external world, realism about of universals, and realism about causation.

Let’s examine our experiences of change, and compare them to our experience of necessary connections. Take first our experience of change: imagine standing at a pedestrian crossing, waiting for the green man to appear – indicating that we can cross the road. Our brains, unless we are particularly preoccupied with philosophical problems, seem able to discriminate between the absence and presence of the illuminated green man. But what, metaphysically, is going on? Are our brains detecting a difference between the green man’s absence-at- t_1 and his presence-at- t_2 , or are they discriminating between the absence of the green man *simpliciter*, and his presence *simpliciter*? If we think the content of experience is externalist, the answer to that question will depend on whether a dynamic or static metaphysics gets things right. If a dynamic metaphysics gets things right, then we detect change in how things are that is constitutive of the passage of time. Our brains don’t, on an externalist view of experience, detect *that* there is passage, since if a static metaphysics gets things right we would

¹⁷ p.374-5. Skow goes on to argue against this view of experience, on the basis that it does not fit well with a moving spotlight view of time. I will not discuss his objections here, largely because they depend on a moving-spotlight view which I have not been assuming.

observe no tell-tale feature in our phenomenology, or brain processes, that would let us know that time was not, in the relevant sense, passing.

Consider a parallel case – that of necessary connections. David Hume famously rejects our ability to detect necessary connections:

“in single instances of the operation of bodies, we never can, by our utmost scrutiny, discover any thing but one event following another; without being able to comprehend any force or power, by which the cause operates, or any connexion between it and its supposed effect”¹⁸

This seems a similar argument to Prosser’s. Our brains detect something happening and something else happening, but our brains can’t discriminate between the cases where there is a necessary connection, and cases where there is something else that causes both events to happen, or the events are mere coincidence.¹⁹ Nonetheless, a causal realist might sensibly think that when we experience two contiguous events that are in fact causally related, we experience necessarily connected events, even though we don’t experience *that* they are necessarily connected; the necessity of their connection cannot be established merely by paying close enough attention to our phenomenology. In this case, too, the conclusion that two events are causally related is not independent of experience on an externalist reading of experience. This is, admittedly, grist for Prosser’s mill. On an externalist sense of experience we might very well experience change in one sense rather than another, or causation in one sense rather than another, or time as passing rather than not. But none of this gets the claim that we can tell from experience that time passes. My contention is that being able to tell from experience *that* time passes is more amenable to Dunbar’s view than a standard dynamic metaphysics, and that shows that a standard dynamic metaphysics should not make such a claim.

One might want to say something stronger. Though we may not be able to perceive *that* events are causally related, or *that* time passes, one might think our experiences have a certain phenomenological character, whereby events *seem* to be causally connected, or time *seems* to pass, even though we can perceive (in Prosser’s sense) neither necessary connections nor time’s passage. Prosser cites Robin Le Poidevin:

¹⁸ Hume, D. (1772), p.144

¹⁹ Hume didn’t put the point in terms of what our brains can detect, but the force of his point is not lost when it is framed in these terms.

"We are not only aware of [the passage of time] when we reflect on our memories of what has happened. We just see time passing in front of us, in the movement of a second hand round a clock, or the falling of sand through an hourglass, or indeed any motion or change at all".²⁰

Le Poidevin is a fine example of someone who doesn't believe time passes, but thinks there is something that *seems* like passage to be explained, as is L.A. Paul:

"I step out of the house and feel the cool breeze on my face. I feel the freshness of the cool breeze now, and, as the breeze dies down, I notice that time is passing – I need to start walking or I will be late for class... Reflection on the qualitative character of such experiences suggests that events occurring now have a characteristic property of *nowness*, responsible for a certain special 'feel'".²¹

I don't think a dynamic metaphysics needs to make a claim to there being experiences of *nowness* (the relevant seeming might not be so metaphysically loaded, as Paul goes on to argue), but were one to make it, it would not conflict with Prosser's argument that we do not (in his sense) *perceive* passage. If we did not have the sorts of experiences we had, causal realism would not have the plausibility it has, even though experience of causal relations doesn't map one-to-one on to necessary connections. Likewise, if we did not have the sorts of experiences of movement, change, anticipation, recollection, and endurance that we have, then a dynamic metaphysics would not be so plausible. But the fact that certain sorts of experiences make a view plausible does not mean that we can *tell* in virtue of having them that some controversial metaphysical claim is true. Paul and Le Poidevin both accept that our experiences lend *plausibility* to a dynamic view, even though they both accept that we can't tell on the basis of our experience that a dynamic metaphysics obtains, since they both reject dynamic metaphysics.

How do we get from experiences of motion, change, anticipation, memory, etc. to a dynamic metaphysics? Experiences as of fleetingness, nowness, change, persistence, and causation, if ubiquitous in our experience and very widely shared, might give us some reason to explore certain metaphysical views: consider Aristotle's advice to set out the appearances and work through them dealing with the problems, and accept whatever view saves most (or the most important) of the beliefs

²⁰ Robin Le Poidevin (2007), p.76, cited in Prosser (2013a)

²¹ Paul (2010), p.333

you started with.²² Such feelings needn't be *so* decisive as to count as perceptions in Prosser's sense. To treat them like that would be to treat them as tracking local phenomena, like Dunbar does, rather than as potentially hinting at general features of reality.

I don't want to engage in a lengthy argument for a positive view of how dynamic metaphysics should be defended. The aim of the paper is primarily negative: to argue that what Prosser says we cannot in principle find, should not be what defenders of dynamic metaphysics take themselves to be looking for. To the extent I have a positive proposal to offer, it is this: we should look at the different attempts there have been to make sense of our experience, and try to come up with the most general attempt to make sense of things, (especially those features of experience that are common across time and culture), other features of our metaphysics,²³ our broader practices,²⁴ and our best science, and see what our best and most general attempt to make sense of things looks like. This proposal is compatible with many different results, and, as a method, it doesn't presuppose that the result will be a defence of a dynamic metaphysics. It is because it is a general attempt to make sense of things that dynamic metaphysics is superior to Dunbar's view, and to the extent Prosser's views on what it is to perceive the passage of time favour Dunbar's views, that is a sign that accepting Prosser's assumptions draws us away from a sensible defence of a dynamic metaphysics.

One way in which our experiences of fleetingness, or the identity of a bird flown behind a tree, or of causal relations might be useful in working out what metaphysics to hold is by showing us what work these seemings do. In cases of pathology, where time doesn't seem to pass, or things don't seem causally related, or to persist through time, or to change, we might examine what people are no longer able to do. To the extent these seemings help us get by in the world, we might think they are more important to fit into most general story of how the world is.

Here's a way in which our experiences of change, causation, persistence, and time might be part of a general attempt to make sense of things. They are descriptions of how things seems to individuals that don't reflect reality. Jennan Ismael defends this view:

“We can ask about the nature and structure of time as it appears *sub specie aeternitatus*. Or we can ask about how time appears to the embedded agent. The first is a question about

²² Nichomachean Ethics 1145b1

²³ E.g. thinking of ourselves as enduring subjects. Cf. Velleman (2006)

²⁴ Many of our practices are, to use James Lenman's (2002) phrase 'generation centred', and privilege people contemporaneous to us over earlier or later people.

ontology. The second is a question about phenomenology. Those who think the ontological question should be settled by physics can be impatient with exploration of phenomenology.”²⁵

We have a contrast between an attempt to give an account of the world ‘under the aspect of eternity’ and from the perspective of an agent in the midst of things. What the dynamic metaphysician is doing (according to this objection) is merely giving an account of the world from the perspective of agents, rather than give an impersonal objective account. This objection mischaracterises the dispute: The static metaphysician is giving an account of the world *sub specie aeternitatus*, and Dunbar is giving an account of an agent embedded in time, while dynamic metaphysics gets left out in the cold. The dynamic metaphysician claims that we can’t ask about the world as it appears *sub specie aeternitatus*, because there is no way the world eternally is. The crucial claim of a dynamic metaphysics is that the world is constantly changing as time passes.

Dunbar’s challenge is to show why the dynamic metaphysician is not making the confusion between ontology and phenomenology that Dunbar is making, and the answer requires that we stop thinking of the debate in Ismael’s terms. Dynamic metaphysics rejects the possibility of a description of the world from outside of time, but insists that needn’t commit us to reading our metaphysics directly from experience. The disagreement, if we are to avoid being no better than Dunbar, is about what it is to do ontology, not how to describe our phenomenology. The dynamic metaphysician claims that our most general attempt to make sense of the nature and structure of time is not an account of time which can step outside of time. This does not involve the dynamic metaphysician claiming that we are simply giving an account of the perspective of an agent, who may be bored one minute and thrilled the next. The dynamic metaphysician is, as I argued in section 1, interested in the most general claims they can make.

4: Concluding Thoughts

I argued in section 1 that Dunbar’s view of the world should be rejected as it is insufficiently general, and the dispute between defenders of dynamic and static metaphysics should be one over the best and most general attempt to make sense of things. This dispute is ongoing, and how the different elements

²⁵ Ismael (2012), p.150

are weighed against each other is a key battleground.²⁶ It is precisely the proposed ubiquity of time's passage that rules it out as the sort of thing we should think our brains can detect. Defenders of a dynamic view, therefore, should not feel threatened arguments, by Prosser and others, that our brains cannot detect passage, as I argued in section 2. There is, as I consider in section 3, some basis in experience for the view that time passes, but it is an indirect one, that is the product of a general attempt to make sense of things. Crucially, I argue, we should not confuse a metaphysics which rejects our ability to step outside of time in our most general attempt to make sense of it with an exercise in phenomenology. To do so would be to fail to meet Dunbar's challenge.

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²⁶ See e.g. Heather Dyke (2012), Deng (2013)

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