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INTRODUCTION



The obsession with time in 1880s–1930s American-British philosophy

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ABSTRACT

In American-British philosophy around the turn of the twentieth century, every philosopher and their dog had something to say on time. Thinkers worried about our *experience* of time, and the *metaphysics* of time. This introduction to the special issue, *Time in American-British Philosophy 1880s–1930s*, investigates that obsession, explaining how its philosophers spilled pints of ink on time, and produced the first-ever surveys of time. I historically contextualise their work and explore some of its driving causes, including experimental psychology of time perception, and theological worries over evolution. This article concludes by surveying the rich, wide-ranging papers within this collection, covering time in Shadworth Hodgson, William James, Mary Calkins, Victoria Welby, Bertrand Russell, G. E. Moore, A. A. Robb, Alfred North Whitehead, Norman Kemp Smith, J. M. E. McTaggart, Karin Costelloe-Stephen, Hilda Oakeley, May Sinclair, and George P. Adams.

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If I were asked to name the most characteristic feature of the thought of the last twenty-five years I should answer: the discovery of Time.

Samuel Alexander (*Spinoza and Time*, 15)

Introduction

In American-British philosophy around the turn of the twentieth century, every philosopher and their dog had something to say on time. Thinkers worried about our *experience* of time: Do we actually experience time? How do we experience the present? Is temporal experience continuous? They

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also worried about the *metaphysics* of time: Is time real? What is its nature? How does time relate to space? Excepting the leviathan literature on J. M. E. McTaggart, time during this period is under-studied.¹ Further, the existing scholarship tends to be piecemeal, focusing on time in individual philosophers and only occasionally considering the philosophical scene more broadly.² This collection offers the first sustained study of 1880s–1930s American-British philosophy of time, exploring the work of Shadworth Hodgson, William James, Mary Calkins, Victoria Welby, Bertrand Russell, G. E. Moore, A. A. Robb, Alfred North Whitehead, Norman Kemp Smith, McTaggart, Karin Costelloe-Stephen, Hilda Oakeley, May Sinclair, and George P. Adams. The following pages showcase the richness and fecundity of temporal thought during this period.

Why studying time in 1880s–1930s American-British philosophy matters

Studying time during this period is important for two reasons. One is that interest in this topic is growing. Over the last decade, historians of philosophy have, for example, explored time in the thought of Hodgson, James, McTaggart, Samuel Alexander, Russell, Whitehead, Susan Stebbing, C. D. Broad, Arthur Eddington, and Oakeley.³ Further, citation rates of some historical texts have jumped.⁴ For example, McTaggart's 1908 "The Unreality of Time" was cited around 170 times before the year 2000, and over 2,300 times since. Russell's 1915 "On the Experience of Time" was cited around 70 times before 2000, and over 240 times since. James' 1886 "The Perception of Time", an article incorporated almost verbatim into his (1890) *Principles of Psychology*, was cited just 15 times before the year 2000, and 90 times after. I have sampled these citations and they do not seem to be from historians of philosophy, but from contemporary philosophers and psychologists, using these texts to frame ongoing research.

Another, more important reason to dig into this topic, is that the historical philosophers *themselves* cared deeply about time. All the thinkers covered in

¹On McTaggart, see Ingthorsson (*McTaggart's Paradox*) and McDaniel ("John M. E. McTaggart", §3), who provide many further references. Large-scale histories of philosophy of time usually focus on McTaggart to the exclusion of all other philosophers from this period; see for example Turetzky's *Time*, or Bardon's *Brief History of the Philosophy of Time*.

²Broader scholarship includes Weinert (*Scientist as Philosopher*) and Sánchez-Ron ("Relativity"), who discuss the early reception of relativity amongst philosophers. Mander (*British Idealism*) discusses time in several British idealists. Ingthorsson (*McTaggart's Paradox*) explores the context of McTaggart's thought in unprecedented detail. Arthur (*Time Flow*) discusses the passage of time in historical figures such as Russell, James, and Robb.

³See Andersen ("Specious Present"), Arthur (*Time Flow*), Fisher (*Samuel Alexander*), Ghisoni da Silva ("Russell and Wittgenstein"), Hernes ("Whitehead"), Ingthorsson (*McTaggart's Paradox*), Mander ("Hodgson"), Shardlow ("Tale"), Thomas ("Monadologies and Time"; "Broad's Growing Block"; "Time and Pictures"), and West ("Stebbing on Eddington").

⁴Figures taken from Google Scholar analytics, during June 2022.

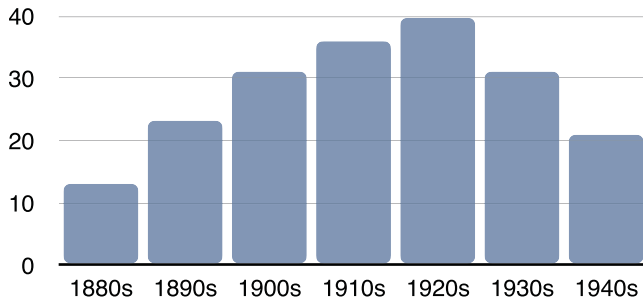


Figure 1. Number of article titles featuring 'Time' in leading philosophy journals.

this volume wrote repeatedly on time across their careers. Evidence of the importance of time to this era is that it saw (what I believe to be) the first English-language studies of time: Benjamin W. Van Riper's 1916 *Some Views of the Time Problem*, J. Alexander Gunn's 1929 *The Problem of Time*, Louise Heath's 1936 *The Concept of Time*, and M. F. Cleugh's 1937 *Time and Its Importance in Modern Thought*. These books cover the history of time before turning to time in 'modern' thought, and they all imply that the philosophy of time is undergoing a renaissance. For example, Gunn (*The Problem of Time*, 9) states, "an examination of Time is imperative for the philosophical thinker of to-day ... [and] the foundation of any philosophy". Cleugh (*Time*, 6) writes, "The importance of time in metaphysics is more fully realised at present than ever before". Further evidence of how popular this topic became can be seen from increasing numbers of discussions of time in leading philosophy journals. Figure 1 is crudely constructed⁵ but it shows that interest in time built steadily from the late nineteenth century, peaking in the 1920s.

Time in American-British philosophy before the 1880s

By way of contextualizing the contents of this volume, this section considers American-British philosophy of time *before* the 1880s. Let's start with the experience of time. Late nineteenth-century American-British philosophy is notable for its raft of work on this issue. Key texts include Hodgson's 1878 *Philosophy of Reflection*; Robert Kelly's (aka E. R. Clay⁶) anonymous 1882

⁵It is based on a JSTOR search of six leading philosophy journals of the period, for articles including 'time' in their titles. The journals are *Mind*; *The Monist*; *The Philosophical Review*; *Journal of Speculative Philosophy*; *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society for the Systematic Study of Philosophy*; and *The Journal of Philosophy, Psychology and Scientific Methods*. The data is crude because it does not capture articles on time that lack the word "time" in their titles, and it mistakenly captures articles with 'time' in their titles that do not discuss time. Further, some of these journals were founded during the period covered; for example, *The Monist* was established in 1890, and *The Philosophical Review* in 1892. Nonetheless, this shows substantial philosophical interest in time.

⁶James mysteriously refers to Kelly as Clay; Andersen and Grush ("Time-Consciousness", 295) determined Clay's identity.

The Alternative: A Study in Psychology; James Ward's 1886 *Encyclopaedia Britannica* article "Psychology"; James' 1886 "The Perception of Time"; and F. H. Bradley's 1893 *Appearance and Reality*. Although there is scholarship on some of these later texts, there is very little on what went before. To illustrate, in the "Nineteenth and early twentieth-century perspectives" section of Philips' *Handbook of Philosophy of Temporal Experience*, the only pertinent philosopher mentioned is Hodgson.

Rare scholarship on Hodgson and James' sources trace lines of thought on temporal experience running from Locke via Scottish philosophers such as Thomas Reid, Dugald Stewart, Thomas Brown, and William Hamilton; and via English philosophers such as David Hartley, Abraham Tucker, and William Watson.⁷ Of these authors, Hamilton lies closest to our period. Prompted by Reid, Hamilton (*Reid*, 339–40) argues we cannot have *immediate* knowledge of past or future things, for we can only immediately know existing things, and the past and future are non-existent. Our knowledge of the past is *mediate*, through memory. Ultimately, these ideas would be utilized in Hodgson's theory of the 'specious present', which holds that our experiential present has duration. Hodgson (*Philosophy of Reflection*, 1.253) distinguishes between the "metaphysical" present, an indivisible point; and the "empirical" present, a "portion of the course of time, containing at least the minimum of consciousness". Famously, James drew on Hodgson to craft his own specious present theory. James ("The Perception of Time", 377–8) distinguishes the "strict" or "knife-edge" present, from the "specious" or "practically cognised" present which has "a certain breadth of its own". Likely familiar with both Hodgson and James, Bradley (*Appearance and Reality*, 40–2) considers time as it is "presented" to us, and argues "presented time must be time present". He claims that the "temporal contents" of the "now" imply a "before and after", indicating he also holds some kind of specious present theory.

Late nineteenth-century philosophical work on time experience was also fuelled by experimental psychology. Roewecklein (*Time in Psychology*, 51–2) explains that experimental work likely began in 1860, and was well underway by the 1880s. Many early studies attempted to measure the human 'time-sense', our apprehension of duration or change, using 'time-sense apparatus' such as pendulums or wheels. Practicing psychologists James and Calkins drew heavily on this research. Partly through James' meta analysis of this research, Roewecklein (*Time in Psychology*, 63–4) credits James with ushering in a new 'era' of psychological, empirical analysis of time. Psychological and philosophical interest in temporal perception bloomed together.

⁷On the Scottish line, see Andersen and Grush ("Time-Consciousness"); on the English line, see Thomas ("Specious Present").

Let's turn to the metaphysics of time. I find that, from the mid-eighteenth to mid-nineteenth century, American-British philosophers were largely uninterested in this field. Many leading philosophers of the period wrote nothing (so far as I am aware) on temporal metaphysics, including Jeremy Bentham, Adam Smith, Edmund Burke, Benjamin Franklin, Alexander Hamilton, Thomas Jefferson, William Godwin, George Jardine, Catharine Macaulay, David Williams, Mary Wollstonecraft, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Mary Everest Boole, George Boole, and James Mill. This disinterest is likely due in part to the Scottish Enlightenment, which discouraged metaphysics generally.⁸

Interest in the metaphysics of time kindled slowly via thinkers such as Hamilton and William Whewell, but I find the topic becomes really popular with the rise of idealism. This movement took an earlier, and deeper, hold in Britain. Following the academic appointments of T. H. Green and Edward Caird in 1866, years of idealist teaching were followed by idealist publications from the mid-1870s onwards.⁹ Many of these advanced complex metaphysics of time. For example, Green (*Prolegomena to Ethics*, 63) argues that ultimate reality comprises an eternal consciousness, to which before and after, and time itself, is an appearance. Bradley (*Appearance and Reality*, 43) argues at length that time is "a contradictory appearance". Caird (*The Evolution of Religion*, i.171–2) argues that the Absolute is at once unchanging, and continually changing – in time, and out of it. A little later, American idealists also issued metaphysics of time. G. H. Howison (*Limits of Evolution*, xiii) argues that time owes its "entire existence" to mind. Josiah Royce (*World and the Individual*, 140–1) argues that "all temporal sequences, are present at once to the Absolute". Why this fresh interest? One reason is simply that metaphysics was central to idealism.¹⁰ More speculatively, I argue another reason lies in idealist attitudes towards evolution.

Darwin's 1859 *On the Origin of Species* popularized relatively new geological theories holding that the Earth is not thousands, but *millions* of years old.¹¹ For example, in a section titled "On the lapse of Time", Darwin (*Origin*, 282–3) explains that natural selection works "very slowly" but "incomprehensibly vast" past time can accommodate it. The thesis that evolution *requires* deep time proliferated via science popularizers, who depicted "vast expanses of time" in "evolutionary epics".¹² Riper and Heath both devote sections of their studies of time to the effects of evolution. Riper (*Time Problem*, 14) writes that geology and evolution gave philosophy "immensely more time and change to think about", and made solving the problem of time

⁸See Bristow ("Enlightenment", §1.2).

⁹See Mander (*British Idealism*, 9).

¹⁰See Copleston (*A History of Philosophy*, 146) and Mander (*British Idealism*, 4–5).

¹¹See Toulmin and Goodfield (*The Discovery of Time*, 167–172; 221–4).

¹²See Lightman (*Victorian Popularizers of Science*, 220).

“much more urgent”. Heath (*The Concept of Time*, 120–122) states that geology showed time to be a “serious and influential factor in nature”, and Darwinian evolution made time “a vital factor in reality”.

On the Origin of Species also contributed to the nineteenth-century crisis of faith. As Brooke (“Evolution and Religion”, 211–2) puts it, “Darwin’s staggering vision of a long, tortuous, bloodstained trail of evolution ... [was] the last straw”. Evolution seems to take away from God as creator, and it is difficult to reconcile our descent from apes with our biblical creation in God’s image. Many American and British idealists were deeply religious. Copleston (*A History of Philosophy*, 147; see also 266) explains that idealism stressed the “spiritual character of ultimate reality”, standing “firmly on the side of religion”. Given this, it is unsurprising that many idealists were hostile towards Darwinian evolution. Cunningham (*Darwinian Legacy*, 19; 57) writes that one of idealism’s “chief goals” was “to undo the influence of evolutionary thinking”.¹³

Putting Darwin’s need for deep time and the atheist implications of evolution together, let’s step into the boots of a religious nineteenth-century philosopher. You believe something divine underlies the world. You are hostile towards the seemingly atheist cosmos offered by Darwinian evolution. How might you reconcile evolution with your system? An excellent strategy would surely be to show that time is ultimately unreal, dependent on a deeper, divine reality. If time is an appearance, then evolution certainly is. In effect, I suggest idealists initially took up the metaphysics of time by way of rejecting the ultimate reality of evolution.

Regardless of why idealists became so interested in temporal metaphysics, it is unquestionably the case that much subsequent work on this issue is written against the backdrop of their views, especially that of Calkins, Russell, Kemp Smith, and McTaggart. As the nineteenth century wore on, debates over the experience and metaphysics of time proliferated across philosophical movements, through idealists, pragmatists, new realists, and process philosophers. The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries would be a grand age for the philosophy of time.

Introducing the papers of this issue

The papers are organized chronologically, moving from the 1880s onwards. Three features of the collection as a whole are especially noteworthy. First, although its subject is time, it also explores many further topics. Temporal experience leads to us to ponder issues such as the role of the mind in perception, and the nature of memory. The metaphysics of time swiftly leads to the nature of past things, events, and even reality itself. Time is knotted with a wealth of further philosophy.

¹³See also Metz (*British Philosophy*, 249), Mander (*British Idealism*, 261–2), and Brooke (“Evolution and Religion”).

Second, the collection's American-British geographic focus should not be taken to imply that these are the only national contexts in which important philosophy of time took place. On the contrary, fascinating theories can be found in Charles Bernard Renouvier, Jean-Marie Guyau, Henri Bergson, Franz Brentano, Alexius Meinong, Albert Einstein, German Louis William Stern, and Edmund Husserl. It is because there is so *much* philosophy of time during this period that this collection has a narrow geographic focus; to properly explore time in other contexts, additional studies are needed. Further, this American-British focus highlights the myriad intellectual connections between thinkers. For example, James taught Calkins and Adams; McTaggart taught Russell and Moore; Russell taught Costelloe-Stephen. Whitehead collaborated with Russell; Adams drew on Whitehead. James borrowed from Hodgson; in turn, Calkins, Russell, Kemp Smith, and Adams responded to James. Russell critiqued James and Robb; Welby critiqued Calkins; Welby and Oakeley critiqued McTaggart; Sinclair critiqued Russell and Whitehead. Notably, *despite* this volume's geographic focus, Bergson's French philosophy is prominent – exposing his immense, international impact.

Third, whilst this collection features famous time theorists such as James, Russell, and McTaggart, it also includes some who are less familiar. With regard to the history of philosophy, some of them are *very* poorly known: Welby has been almost exclusively studied by semiotic scholars, and is not currently known as a metaphysician; Kemp Smith's historical work has been studied, but not his original philosophy; and Adams has not been studied at all. Were it in my power to add more pages to this volume, I would have welcomed further work on time in Bradley, Royce, Charles Sanders Peirce, Constance Naden, Alexander, Arthur Lovejoy, Stebbing, Broad, and George Santayana. Happily, many of these time theorists receive at least brief mentions in the following papers.

Having considered the collection as a whole, let's turn to the individual papers. Holly Andersen's contribution, "Hodgson on the Relations Between Philosophy, Science and Time", explores how philosophy relates to the sciences, and how both relate to time. Focusing on Hodgson's 1884 Presidential Address to the Aristotelian Society, Andersen argues that, for Hodgson, time as studied in science must be distinguished from the temporal structure of immediate consciousness. Further, his work on these issues help us understand how Hodgson situates philosophy as a foundation for new sciences – including psychology. In this regard, Andersen shows that Hodgson prefigures James' early pragmatism.

Jeremy Dunham compares Bergson and James on temporal consciousness in "Flights in the Resting Places: James and Bergson on Mental Synthesis and the Experience of Time". In the 1800s, James developed his 'stream of consciousness' theory, whilst Bergson developed his '*la durée réelle*'. Although

scholars often note similarities between their theories, Dunham argues that they are fundamentally different. However, in 1906, Bergson changed James' mind on various key issues, including his account of temporal experience. Understanding this shift helps us better understand James' late philosophy, and the crucial impact Bergson had on his thought.

My own paper, "Mary Calkins, Victoria Welby, and the Spatialisation of Time" considers a deep trans-Atlantic disagreement: in 1899, Calkins argues we *shouldn't* spatialize time; in 1907, critiquing Calkins, Welby argues we *should*. Exploring and comparing their accounts, I argue the heart of their clash is metaphysical. Drawing on experimental psychology, Calkins reasons from our experience of time to its partial reality. In contrast, drawing on lines of thought around the 'fourth dimension', popularized by H. G. Wells' *Time Machine*, I read Welby as spatializing time so radically that her unique position comprises anti-realism about time.

Jack Shardlow considers Russell's 1912–1913 writings on temporal experience in his contribution, "The Experience and Knowledge of Time, Through Russell and Moore". Critiquing James, and drawing on Moore, Russell sought to explain why the present time is so intimate to a given subject, and this work formed the basis of later important papers, including Russell's "On the Experience of Time". Shardlow advances a new reading of Russell on temporal experience, arguing that Russell's account is of particular interest because it captures the philosophical insight that considerations about time are at the heart of phenomenological experience.

Richard Arthur considers Robb's account of time in his article, "On the Significance of A. A. Robb's Philosophy of Time, Especially in Relation to Bertrand Russell's". Amongst physicists, Robb's work is now acknowledged to be of great importance, but it was not appreciated by his philosophical contemporaries. Having shown how Robb's metaphysics of time is grounded in his interpretation of special relativity, Arthur enquires into its lacklustre reception, especially at the hands of Russell. His investigation highlights the shared idealist premises of Russell and McTaggart, as well as further points of agreement between Russell, Eddington, and McTaggart.

Katarina Perovic's contribution, "The Main Features of Whitehead's Early Temporal Ontology", considers the metaphysics Whitehead developed from 1910 to 1924. During these years, Whitehead grappled with Einstein's general theory of relativity, attempting to reconcile scientific enquiry with our observations and intuitions. Perovic reads Whitehead's early ontology as defending the passage of time; and as taking events to be fundamental, dynamic entities from which objects, properties, and time itself are abstracted. She shows that Whitehead offers insights that could be of use to twenty-first century dynamic A-theories of time.

Kemp Smith is best known as a historian of philosophy but Geoffrey Gorham's article, "Norman Kemp Smith on the Experience of Duration",

argues for the importance of his philosophy of time. Focusing on Kemp Smith's 1924 *Prolegomena to an Idealist theory of Knowledge*, Gorham shows that this text develops a Kantian account of time, and uses it to solve a problem around the specious present. How can we perceive a duration if we only perceive the present? Gorham compares Kemp Smith's solution with that of Alexander and George F. Stout, further expanding our history of these debates about temporal experience.

McTaggart is arguably the most famous philosopher of time, yet existing scholarship focuses almost exclusively on his negative argument for the unreality of time. W. J. Mander's paper, "The Right Kind of Nonsense – A Study of McTaggart's C and D series", remedies this by enquiring into McTaggart's seemingly non-sensical, positive account of time. Why does timeless reality misleadingly appear to us as temporal? Centring around McTaggart's 1921–1927 *The Nature of Existence*, Mander argues that the answers lie in McTaggart's spiritualism and mysticism, and that they are far from nonsense.

Matyáš Moravec considers the impact of Bergsonian time in "Taking Time Seriously: The Bergsonism of Karin Costelloe-Stephen, Hilda Oakeley, and May Sinclair". He shows that three Bergsonian elements made their way into the 1910s–1930s work of Costelloe-Stephen, Oakeley, and Sinclair: novelty, memory, and indivisibility. All three philosophers place time at the centre of their philosophies, so this study helps us understand their systems more broadly; and the reception of Bergson's thought in Britain after Russell's 1912 ferocious attack on it. Moravec argues that the neglect of these three women philosophers may be connected with the fall of Bergsonism.

Finally, we come to Anthony Fisher's article, "Temporal Experience and the Present in George P. Adams' Eternalism". During the 1920s–1930s, Adams developed a novel kind of eternalism on which the past, present and future are all real but only the present is actual. He reasons analogously from time to modality: like past and future times, *possibilia* are non-actual but real. Fisher argues that Adams' exploitation of time-modality analogies offers insights for current debates. Further, Adams' eternalism likely influenced that of mid-twentieth century metaphysician Donald C. Williams, who later influenced D. M. Armstrong and David Lewis.

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