

Time and Consciousness – the Quintessence of Life and Reality?

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On the eve of the twentieth century many philosophers questioned the conventional outlook on individual consciousness and time apprehension. William James and Henri Bergson for example, tried to define the nature of time as well as the experience of time. But some things are not easily bent to simple linear description and time is one of them. Time is one of the most basic categories of human experience. Doubts have been cast as to the validity of considering time a constituent of the physical world, but individuals and societies continue to experience time and to regulate their lives by it. Some of our notions of time are derived from natural processes: day and night, a solar year with its four seasons (but not in the arctic zone) etc. A person shut off from all perception of the outside world would still, presumably, continue to experience the succession of his thoughts and feelings. In between these two extremes – the natural and the personal – resides the main stream of temporal experience: time as an inter-subjective public, social convention that we establish in order to facilitate our living together.

“To believe that your impression hold good for others”, wrote Virginia Woolf of Jane Austen, *“is to be released from the cramp and confinement of personality”* [1]. Virginia Woolf wrote this almost in envy for she was herself bound by the cramp and confinement of personality; her sense of significant was intensely personal and individual, depending on subtle shifts of mood and feelings. *“What is meant by reality?”* she once asked and replied: *“it would seem to be something very erratic, very undependable – now to be found in a dusty road, now in a scrap of newspaper in the street, now in a daffodil in the sun. It lights up a group in a room and stamps some casual saying...”* [2]. This is related to James Joyce’s view of the *“epiphany”*, the sudden realization that some quite ordinary incident or situation or object encountered in daily experience has an intense symbolic meaning.

Our civilization tends to think of time as a unidirectional and irreversible flow, a sort of one way street. Such a conception was given a metaphoric shape by Heraclitus early in western history: you cannot step twice into the same river, for other waters and yet other waters go ever flowing on. Today we might add that not only the object of experience but also the experiencing subject is in a constant flux. To become socialized,

the flux must be made measurable. It can become measurable only when a repetitive pattern is discerned within it (e.g. the solar year) or imposed upon it by machines constructed to this end (calendar – time, clock – time, metronome – time). Time is paradoxically repetition within irreversible change. The repetitive aspect of time is sometimes taken one step further and seen as a refutation of Heraclitian unidirectionality, as in Nietzsche and Borges's concepts of circular time. Time is a core system of all cultures, and because culture plays such a prominent role in the understanding of time as a cultural system, it is virtually impossible to separate time from culture at some levels.

Time is treated as a language, as a primary organizer for all activities, synthesizer and interrogator, a way of handling priorities and categorizing experience, a feedback mechanism for how things are going, a measuring rod against which competence, effort and achievement are judged as well as a special message system revealing how people really feel about each other and whether or not they can get along. Time is a core system of cultural, social and personal life and has everything to do not only with how a culture develops, but also with how people of that culture experience the world.

There are serious misconceptions about time, the first of which is that time is singular. Time is not just an immutable constant, as Newton supposed, but a cluster of concepts, events, and rhythms covering an extremely wide range of phenomena. It is for this reason that classifying time "*bristles with difficulties*" [3].

At the micro level of analysis one might say that there are as many different kinds of time as human beings on this earth. Looking at what people actually do one quickly discovers a wide discrepancy between time as it is lived and time as it is considered. As people do quite different things, they unconsciously and sometimes consciously expressed and participate in different categories of time. It is also quite clear that time as Einstein defines it in the technical sense – the time of the physicists is not the same as engineering or technological time. (Engineers must be as precise as possible but they do not under ordinary circumstances have to take into account the fact that Einstein's time is relative and depends upon the speed with which the clock is moving in relationship to the speed of light). Then there are also the biological clocks opposing the time of the clock on the wall in a distant time zone.

There are sacred, profane, metaphysical, physical, biological and clock versions of time, but we have very little idea of how they all fit together or how each affects our lives. All AE languages, including English treat time as a continuum divided into past, present, and future.

Somehow we have managed to objectify or externalize our imagery of the passage of time, which made it possible for us to feel that we can manage time, control it, spend it, save it, or waste it.

Mankind has always been preoccupied with time. Human beings, like fish in water, have only slowly made themselves aware of the time – sea in which they live. Like many important patterns in life, awareness of time is at first difficult to demonstrate. Winston Churchill once said, “*we shape our buildings and then they shape us*” [4]. (This was during the debate on the form that Parliament should have when it was rebuilt following the bombing of London during World War II). Churchill was right, of course, but it isn’t just space that shapes us; time does the same thing, only it is hard to realize that when we build our time systems we are shaping our lives.

It has been only recently, however, that time and space have begun to be recognized as influencing the direction as well as the outcome of behavior. The study of time has led the human species out into the universe, down into the heart of the atom and is the basis of much of the theory concerning the nature of the physical world. In addition, it has held the attention of philosophers and psychologists, who have tried to define the nature of time as well as the experience of time. The novelist and the poet reflect the principal preoccupation of people and their times. Henri Bergson was obsessed with time and considered it an enemy. Proust, like his fellow countrymen, was preoccupied with time and felt that time and memory were inseparable. William James was also interested in the problem of time and his concept of “specious present” which does not rally exist but which represents the continuous flow of the already into the not yet, of retrospect and anticipation, influenced the twentieth – century novelist. Clearly, the novelist must come to grips with time, and how he or she handles it, is a good index to the mastery of his craft. James Joyce sees us as imprisoned by the narrow confines of linear time. Joyce’s protagonist Stephen Dedalus thought it was impossible to separate the clock from the experience of the viewer, and in a way he was right. For Bergson “becoming” was the essence of time and his concept of “durée”, of time as flow and duration rather than a series of points moving chronologically forward, also influenced the twentieth – century novelist, particularly in his handling of plot structure. If time could not be properly conceived of as a series of moments moving forward in a steady progress, “*then the traditional conception of plot which generally involved taking the hero through a sequence of testing circumstance in chronological order, would cease to satisfy*” [5].

Time is, of course, a major device in the works of Virginia Woolf, Aldous Huxley, Marcel Proust, Edouard Dujardin, Franz Kafka, Thomas Mann, James Joyce, Thomas Wolfe and William Faulkner, to mention only a few writers. Clock – time and mind – time as two distinct and separate forms are recognized by all of them. Time to them was the equivalent, in fact the quintessence of consciousness. In Albert Einstein's terms "*time is simply what a clock says*" [6] and the clock can be anything – the drift of a continent, one's stomach at noon, a chronometer, and a calendar of religious ceremonies or a schedule of instruction and production. The clock one is using focuses on different relationships in our personal lives. Bergson saw "duration" as the meaning of life itself, while Kafka made inner time real.

All of these authors implicitly and explicitly accept duality as axiomatic in nature; individual and universal, will and idea, concrete and abstract, artistic and materialistic, separation and merging, present and past, past and future, future and present, outside looking in and inside looking out, life and art, time and eternity, sympathy and detachment, mysticism and humanism, instantaneity and eternity, symbolic and allegorical. Yet duality is nothing more or less the way in which cultures categorize virtually everything. The reader should know that duality, as Einstein put it, is something, which one "*imbibes with one's mother milk*" [7]. We all come by it naturally, which diverts our attention from multiple causation.

Furthermore, new psychological ideas emphasized the multiplicity of consciousness, the coexistence of several levels of subconsciousness in which past experience was retained and by whose retention the whole of personality was colored and determined. It is time, no doubt, Bergson argues, that holds the essence of life and perhaps of all reality. What we have to understand is that time is an accumulation, a growth, duration. "*Duration is the continuous progress of the past which gnaws into the future and which swells as it advances*", it means "*the past in its entirety is prolonged into the present and it abides there actual and acting*" [8]. Duration means that the past endures, that nothing is quite lost. "*Doubtless, we think with only a small part of our past; but it is with our entire past ... that we desire, will and act*" [9].

Since time is an accumulation, the future can never be the same as the past, as for a new accumulation arises at every step. Each moment is not only something new, but also something unforeseeable; change is far more radical than we suppose. At least for a conscious being to exist is to change, to change is to mature, to mature is to go on creating one's self endlessly. Perhaps all reality is time and duration, becoming and change.

In ourselves, memory is the vehicle of duration, the handmaiden of time; and through it, much of our past is actively retained, so that rich alternatives present themselves for every situation. As life grows richer and richer in its scope, its heritage and its memories, the field of choice widens. Consciousness seems proportionate to the living being's power of choice. It lights up the potentialities that surround the act. It fills the interval between what is done and what might be done. It is no useless appendage, it is a vivid theatre of imagination, where alternative responses are pictured and tested before the irrevocable choice. In reality, then, "*a living being is a center of action; it represents a sum of contingency entering into the world; that is to say, a certain quantity of possible action*" [10].

Consciousness is not an entity, a thing, but a flux and a system of relations; it is a point at which the sequence relationship of thoughts coincides illuminatingly with the sequence of events and the relationship of things. In such moments it is reality itself and no mere phenomenon that faces into thought, for beyond phenomena and appearances there is nothing. It is this same passion for the immediate and actual and real that led William James to pragmatism.

Bergson, on the other hand, assumes too much in supposing that the intellect catches only the states and not the flux of reality, of life; "thought is a stream of transitive ideas" as William James had shown before Bergson wrote, "*ideas are merely points that memory selects in the flow of thoughts and the mental current adequately reflects the continuity of perception and the movement of life*" [11]. The primary function of memory is to evoke all those past perceptions, which are analogous to the present perception, to recall to us what preceded and followed them, and so to suggest to us that decision which is the most useful. But this is not all. By allowing us to grasp, in a single intuition, multiple moments of duration, it frees us from the movement of the flow of things, that is to say, from the rhythm of necessity. The more of these moments memory can contract into one, the firmer is the hold which it gives to us on matter; so that the memory of a living being appears indeed to measure above all, its power of action upon things.

How then shall we catch the flow and essence of life if not by thinking and the intellect? But is the intellect all? Let us for a while stop thinking, and just gaze upon that inner reality – our selves – which is better known to us than anything else. We see mind, not matter; time not space; action not passivity; choice not mechanism. We see life in its subtle and penetrating flow, not in its "states of mind", not in its devitalized and separated parts, as when the zoologist examines a dead frog's legs, or

studies preparations under a microscope, and thinks that he is a biologist studying life. This direct perception, this simple and steady looking upon a thing, is intuition; not any mystic process but the most direct examination possible to the human mind.

By direct perception we feel the presence of mind whereas by intellectual circumlocution we arrive at the notion that thought is a dance of molecules in the brain. Mind, then, is not identical with brain. Consciousness depends upon the brain, and it falls with it, but so does a coat fall with the nail on which it hangs – which does not prove that the coat is an “epiphenomenon”, an ornamental ectoplasm of the nail. The brain is the system of images and reaction-patterns; consciousness is the recall of images and the choice of reactions. *“The direction of the stream is distinct from the river bed, although, it must adopt its winding course. Consciousness is distinct from the organism which it animates, although it must undergo its vicissitudes”* [12].

We, nevertheless seem to think of mind and thought in terms of matter and brain because that part of our minds which we call the “intellect” is a constitutional materialist; it was developed in the process of evolution to understand and deal with material, spatial objects; from this field it derives all its concepts and its laws, and its notion of a fatalistic and predictable regularity everywhere. *“Our intellect in the narrow sense of the word, is intended to secure the perfect fitting of our body to its environment, to represent the relations of external things among themselves, in short, to think matter”* [13]. It sees all becoming as being as a series of states; it misses the connective tissue of the flow of duration that constitutes their very life.

The moving picture seems to our tired eyes to be alive with motion and action. Here, surely, science and mechanism have caught the continuity of life. On the contrary, it is just here that science and the intellect reveal their limitations. The moving picture does not move it is not a picture of motion; it is only a series of instantaneous photographs, snap-shots, taken in such a rapid succession that when they are thrown in rapid succession upon the screen, the spectator enjoys the illusion of continuity. But it is an illusion none the less and as the ‘motion’ picture camera divides into static poses the vivid current of reality, so the human intellect catches a series of states, loses the continuity that weaves them into life. *“We see matter and we miss energy, we think that we know what matter is, but when at the heart of the atom we find energy, we are bewildered, and our categories melt away”* [14].

Life escapes these solid concepts, for life is a matter of time rather than space; it is not a mere redistribution of matter and motion, it is fluid

and persistent. Virginia Woolf caught the essence of this concept when in 1919 she wrote: “*life is not a series of gig-lamps symmetrically arranged, but a luminous halo, a semi transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end*” [15].

Henry Bergson in *La pensée et le mouvant*, argued that consciousness treats life as if it were a motion picture, “*inner time is just like a tune, like a succession, an infinite duration that represents evolution itself*” [16]. Proust tried to recuperate time; to retain only what can be repeated. Inner time, subjective time is reversible, as we find it in Faulkner’s works. Inner life lives in a continuous time and it is felt in particular moments of flash – backs. Through flash – backs, the moments are perceived as some openings for the sacred time, when the profane time pervades into the flux of sacred time.

On the other hand, Bergson in *Matière et mémoire* says that our past can be perceived and recaptured only as past, if we follow and adopt the movement through which it appears, coming out of the dark; in other words, Bergson explained the meaning of duration as “*mixed presence of past, present and future time*” [17]. From this point of view it can be said that the gradual disappearance of the division of time is felt like a victory of Kairos over Cronos. Kierkegaard argues: “*if one can find a firm step, a present in the infinite succession of time, then one could speak of a division of time; but each moment is a sum of all the moments, it is a process of continuation, a flow, it is neither present, nor past, nor future*” [18].

The drama of time has attracted man ever since the Antiquity and continues to exert its attraction on the XXth century man as well. Man has always tried to come in contact with Aryuma-the God, which governs Time, and has tried to do this by searching the mysteries of the universe in the profane flux of time- through the stream of consciousness technique. The flux of thoughts is seen as a symphony of thought, of cosmic universe itself, of the fight between light and dark.

In a common effort, philosophers such as: Nietzsche, Bergson, James, Heidegger, psychologists such as Freud, Jung as well as XXth writers haven’t done anything but expressed their desire to live a new beginning, to find a model for the age of modern man. These authors have tried to recall the inner landscape of mind, to enter into the archetypal stock, to renew the art by projecting images from the unconscious. By the opposition between sacred time and the discontinuity of profane time, they tried to reenter into the flux of sacred time. The sacred time they appealed to – and in the flux of which they hoped to find germinal essences – is not a withdrawal from reality but a withdrawal from the society that made

them feel exiled, it is the very search for the quintessence and for the purity of reality.

Notes and references

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- [3] Hall, Edward, *The Dance of Life, The Other Dimension of Time*, New York, Anchor Press, 1983, p. 13.
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- [5] Daiches, David, *cited edition*, p. 1154.
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- [7] *Ibid.*, p. 16.
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