The essays of this book, so far, addressed time-related issues in the physical universe, in the life process, also those present in the human mind and—in a single context—in society. The preceding essay went so far as to place human freedom in the general scheme of other forms of freedom. Since fools rush in where angels fear to tread, it is now appropriate to ask: how can we live with human freedom, “that awesome gift”? 

In 1844 Karl Marx completed his *Critique of the Hegelian Philosophy of Right*. In its introduction he wrote that “religion is the general theory of this world, its encyclopedic compendium, its logic in popular form, its spiritual *point d’honneur*, its enthusiasm, its moral sanction, its solemn complement, its universal basis for consolation and justification.” Then follows an epigram that is often cited but hardly ever in context. “Religious suffering is at the same time an expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the feeling of a heartless world and the soul of soulless circumstances. It is the opium of the people.”[1]

Marx failed to give a reason or even speculate about the likely reasons that drive people to seek opiates, to begin with. That reason was identified in the writings of S.G.F. Brandon, a professor of comparative religions. The history of religions demonstrates, he wrote in 1972, “that the basic motivation in religion itself is the quest for security from death or the consequences of death.”[2] This is also the central theme of his *History, Time and Deity*.[3] In the lyric words of the 17th century poet, Robert Herrick,

Gather ye rosebuds while ye may,
Old time is still a-flying,
And this same flower that smiles today
Tomorrow will be dying.[4]

In terms of the hierarchical theory of time—and stated in its shorthand—what people seek relief from, through the consolation of religions, is the tension between time felt and time understood. That tension is the subject of the essay that follows. The formulation that sees the tension between time felt and time understood as in need of “opiates of the people” permits the enlargement of the family of medications. It suggest that we recognize other potentially civilizing opiates among which, the essay maintains, are the arts, the letters and the sciences. For all these continuously mediate the conflicts between time felt and time understood.
TIME FELT, TIME UNDERSTOOD

Abstract

The experience of time’s passage is intimately familiar, the idea of time is strangely elusive. Mature, healthy humans find it is easy to act consistently with the notions of tomorrow, yesterday and today. Yet, explaining what is meant by future, past, and present, without assuming prior familiarity with time, seems impossible. The asymmetry between the obviousness of the experience of time, and the unobviousness of the idea of time, has been a source of perplexity to reflective thought for at least fourteen centuries.

This essay sees the sources of that asymmetry in the evolutionary structuring of the cognitive capacities of the human brain. It draws attention to certain conflicts rooted in the differences between those cognitive capacities—copresent in the mind—and notes the importance of the humanities in the management of the conflicts.

The experience of time’s passage is intimately familiar. Present, future, and past and the flow of time appear to be simple, obvious aspects of the natural world. Yet, trying to explain to someone, who does not already know what is meant by the passage of time is not simply difficult, but it seems impossible. Why so?

This essay proposes an answer to that old question, formulated in terms of a contemporary understanding of man and the world.

First, it searches for the field of learning where the inquiry ought to be anchored, and launches the inquiry. Based on what is learned, it distinguishes between knowledge felt and knowledge understood in general and time felt and time understood, in particular. Next, it recognizes certain unresolvable conflicts between these two forms of familiarity with the nature of time. It concludes by identifying the arts, the letters and the sciences as collectively developed means for dealing with—being able to live with—those conflicts.

1. Situating the Inquiry

In what domain of learning should we anchor our inquiry into the reasons that make experienced time so obvious and the idea of time so unobvious?

Eastern and Western philosophies have a history of at least twenty-four centuries of disciplined speculation concerning the nature of time. But, since the Renaissance, philosophical reasoning came to depend on non-philosophical forms of learning to such an extent as to challenge the validity