Time’s Books

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Adrian Bardon


Adrian Bardon’s _A Brief History of the Philosophy of Time_ offers an accessible yet careful review of a particular path of philosophical inquiry into the question of time. Beginning with figures from the Eleatic school of thought, around 2500 BCE, and touching on key figures and perspectives through the history of philosophy, Bardon then focuses on arguments arising in contemporary analytic philosophy as they address major discoveries in physics and the related sciences. While the book is clearly intended for the novice in these areas—presenting key terminology in bold print and offering clear, introductory explanations of both terms and arguments—it is an enlightening text for anyone who wishes to gain insight into how a certain set of philosophers tackle the question of time. However, being a “brief” history (and thus perhaps to be expected), it does leave out a few major players in the history of the philosophy of time.1 Furthermore, _Brief History_ is more than a mere exegetical presentation of certain historical figures and their positions; rather, Bardon uses the historical review to launch his own argument for a specific, scientific approach to time.

Bardon begins his book—wisely (and with a sense of humor)—by explaining what it is that philosophers do:

_To be honest, philosophers generally dread being asked to explain what philosophy is. Part of the problem is that philosophy is more of an activity—the activity of philosophical thinking—that a subject matter [. . .] Philosophers ask foundational questions [. . .] Indeed, distinguishing

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1 Namely Plotinus, Bergson, and Husserl. His one mention of Husserl, gleaned, it seems, from Dainton’s interpretation, is inaccurate. However, his analyses of the multiple philosophers he does address are careful and clear, albeit occasionally in service of his overall argument.
between questions that are hard to answer and questions that are meaningless or otherwise poorly formed is a big part of the philosophical enterprise. (2-3)

Bardon's point is that, within the philosophy of time, different questions about time have been pursued, with various outcomes. So the enterprise is not just to find the answers to the questions about time, but also to maintain a critical stance as to whether the questions being asked are the right ones. Bardon models this approach throughout his book, examining not only the answers given by philosophers and scientists alike, but also considering the validity of the questions themselves.

The first chapter addresses the link between time and change that was seen by some of the earliest philosophers. Here Bardon looks to Zeno, Aristotle, Parmenides, and Augustine. Beginning with Zeno's three paradoxes, Bardon then provides a response to each conundrum through Aristotle. However, what is most notable in this chapter is Bardon's close reading of Parmenides. Pointing out that this is "the world's earliest surviving example of extended philosophical argumentation" (18), Bardon carefully works through the fragments wherein Parmenides reasons that there is no change, that all change is illusory. The notion of change, Parmenides purports, is an exercise in contradiction: By claiming that things change, we suggest that they pass in and out of existence by passing from the (non-existent) future to the (existent) present and then into the (non-existent) past. Meanwhile, we also contradict ourselves by acting as if the past and the future exist, when all that exists must be present. Thus Bardon summarizes Parmenides' conclusion: "The world as it is in itself is a singularity: unitary, unchanging, perfect" (21). Bardon concludes the chapter by looking briefly to Augustine, who agrees with Parmenides that the past and the future do not exist and thus, like Parmenides, is an "idealista" about time.

Bardon's second chapter begins with the issue of our experiences of temporal passage. In other words, if Parmenides and Augustine are correct that change—and thus time—are not real, what would give us the idea of past and future in the first place? How are we able to remember or anticipate at all? Bardon invokes Locke's empirical account of our temporal experiences as a challenge to the idealist position. Locke argues that we must have a direct experience of succession in order to have the concept of succession. The notion of time, then, would have to come from the physical world. However, Bardon notes that Locke already presumes time: "A memory thought of as a memory involves already identifying something as past; but without the idea of temporal succession already in place, the notion of 'pastness' couldn't possibly mean