PROBLEMS OF TIME: AN ESSAY

BY

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1. INTRODUCTION

If anything, St. Augustine's famous saying about not quite knowing what to say if asked "what is time?" points up time's resistance to analytic scrutiny, while at the same time implying that this does not mean that in such a case we don't really know what we are talking about. We know quite well what time is all about, but we have a hard time defining it. Of course, defining here tends in the direction of placing something within logical limits. And we probably know just enough about time to sense that the encompassing character of temporality envelops analysis, rather than the other way around. If all of this is correct, we immediately land in a nasty complex of problems. For example: should time be analytically impenetrable, then it does not make much sense to regard the problem of time (granting for a moment there is such a problem) as a theoretic problem. For theory winds its way through our civilization primarily along paths of analysis. However, if it makes no sense to approach time theoretically, we are somewhat embarrassed with the record of Western intellectual history, which indicates that throughout its ages the problem of time has occupied the best of academic minds. So to what conclusion does this lead us? Is there a real "problem of time" for theory, or is that suggestion merely an illusion, a pseudo-problem?

1.1. Time in philosophy

Even if the whole burden of reflection on time in the course of Western philosophy has been one of delusion, a marked change appeared around the beginning of the last century which makes for a lot of urgency in renewed attention to a now very real problem of time. If I am allowed the oversimplification of a schematic generalization, the following observation appears to be largely correct. Time in Western thought has always been placed in the context of becoming, of the finite and the mutable, of change and contingency and often of individuality. The temporal world thus became contrasted with an eternally constant, universally necessary, infinite and immutable world of being. Many individual thinkers and schools of thought have throughout history presented important variations of or strong deviations from this theme. However, the contrast just noted, or at least the distinction, can be seen as a significant background trend in our history of ideas. Further, one more feature is noteworthy, viz. that up to a century and a half ago the pressures of time and temporality were never strong enough to undo for any significant period in history the strong bias in favor of the non-temporal. Temporality was not unknown, but neither
was it much appreciated; perhaps not really understood either.

Today it appears that the preference has basically shifted to the other side. A thinker like John Dewey noted with appreciation that, according to him, from the late eighteenth century onward progress and evolution in history and nature have blessed time and change. The kind of time Dewey has in mind is not really different from what it has generally been throughout history: all things perish in time, time means uncertainty and mutability, uncontrollable change and even destruction. So far, nothing new except the difference in appreciation. What is new too, is that the other co-ordinate in the old distinction is no longer a reality, even though it does still play some role. The eternal and immutable are characteristics of the consumption of certainty, but in fact certainty will never be consummated. It will always beckon as an ideal. What is really real is individuality, the historically unique source of unpredictable temporal development. Time is the mystery of individuality.

Dewey is characteristically modern in these views. Globally speaking it can be said that our age relates to the old tradition on time in three ways: the bias has shifted from one pole to the other, the strength of the bias threatens to cancel out the formerly favored co-ordinate, and the basic concept of temporality remains what it has always been under the old regime. It is exactly the last of these three features which presents the problem of time to us as a genuine and legitimate concern. For if it is true that temporality and all that goes with it is deeply appreciated in our age and if it is true as well that the basic impulse for our understanding of time comes from a period almost hostile to this phenomenon, then it would appear that the question as to what time is really all about should be investigated anew. From enemies of time we learned that in a temporal world there is no room for constancy, to mention one example. Is that really so?

1.2. Time in the sciences

However, not only the history of philosophy gives us an indication of the importance of studying the problem of time. Various concerns in sundry fields of science point to the significant role that time plays in all manner of theorizing. Astronomy and branches of the life sciences are working backward in time toward the original condition of existence, futurology is concerned with time in the opposite direction, history and temporality are inseparably interwoven and more of these examples could be mentioned. Now, it seems, generally speaking, to be the case that in scientific concerns, people are said to be working with a concept of time that is supposed to be non-philosophical. Rather, it is claimed, the concept of time used here is a scientific or physical one. And it is likely that what is meant here is a concept of time such as is used in the physical sciences, the famous one that is co-ordinate with space (the space-time world, the space-time continuum, etc.) and that is measurable and to a great extent subject to control, experiment and prediction. The genuine "problem" involved here, however, is that what in this way is so often understood to be "real" time may very well be a costly reduction of our experience of time in reality. Who is to say, for example, that our emotional experience of time (five minutes of waiting for a jury verdict may last a lifetime) is less real. Is it true that