

VERTICAL TIME

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"As to time," St. Augustine wrote in his Confessions, "I know perfectly well what it is so long as no one asks me. The moment someone asks me, I no longer know." Nowadays I think we've reached the stage where we no longer have the same kind of modesty about answering questions on the nature of time, but I wonder whether we've reached a stage where we finally know what we're talking about, even after our questions have been answered. A frequent sort of answer, for instance, involves equations of quantum mechanics which are beyond most of our ability to follow, let alone agree or disagree with. Then again, if the person inquired of is an analytic philosopher, one's question may be answered by analyzing it into different questions: "Well, what sort of thing do you mean by 'time'? Is there a thing that has this name? Wouldn't it be better to talk about the sorts of situations in which we use words like 'when,' 'before,' 'during,' 'after' and 'now?' In fact, is there any point in discussing time at all?"

Confronted with the scintillating display of traditional definitions of time, too, the modern questioner may get no better footing than with the contemporary answers. Aristotle's "time is the counting of the moved," while commendably pat and precise, brings with it a swarm of metaphysical roadblocks and puzzles. Bergson's image of time as a kind of subjective river of feeling has the advantage of getting around some of these roadblocks but the disadvantage of making public time, clock time, unintelligible and "real time" into a sort of private hobby of each experimenter. McTaggart's argument that time is unreal brings out the G.E. Moore in all of us, so that we echo his outburst, "Do you mean to tell me I didn't eat breakfast before I ate lunch?" Kant's statement that time is the form of inner sensibility inspires similar objections: "Do you mean it only looks as though the earth goes around the sun at a regular rate?" Heidegger, inasmuch as I understand him, thinks of "time" as a name for the ways human beings act in and are acted upon by their environment, and its nature can presumably be explicated by just giving a list of the basic modes of human behavior--which is another way of saying that we already know what time is, so long as no one asks us.

All these people, in their maddeningly prolix ways, tried (and still try) to answer the question about time in terms of what I like to refer to as "horizontal" time, and all of them ignored (and still ignore) the fact that time has a "vertical" dimension, a dimension of depth. I intend in what follows to explain what I mean by these terms, and why I think it will help matters to distinguish them, but

let me say at the outset that I don't expect these remarks to illuminate the nature of time especially or even determine what right we have to talk about it. My point is merely that the time "we all know before anyone asks us" is actually better known to us than any theory of time has so far assumed: because we do not only move along its surface but descend and rise in its depth.

I realize that in employing such a spatial metaphor I am violating one of Bergson's canons, who argued that most if not all of the Zenonian conundrums about time could be resolved if only it was understood that time is not space. Bergson himself, however, by his very characterization of experienced time as "duration," conceived of time in spatial terms, as a straight line "enduring" from one point to another--only he insisted the line couldn't be divided at any of the points in between. All of us, probably, see this image of a line in our mind's eye when the topic of time comes up for casual scrutiny. We speak of "stretches" of time and talk of time-periods "beginning" and "ending." Whatever our notions of linear or cyclic stages in history, too, we all regard time as irreversible: the past happened before the present, the present happens before the future, and if the order could be reversed, the words "past, present and future" would lose their meaning. Moreover, whether we regard time as real or illusory, the actual coming-to-be and passing-away of events or a frozen array of eternal facts under the gaze of God, the appearance of this sequence or array will still be that of a straight line with the points connected, causally or logically, in one direction. I don't intend to quarrel with this naive picture, only to add to it. It is a picture of time as horizontal, as occurring on a single plane. My suggestion is that time is really more like space than this picture implies, that it moves not only forward but up and down within a single moment.

The nearest any philosopher has come to this admittedly strange-sounding idea, at least that I know of, is William James' remarks about the "specious present." For him, I'm sure, it was an ordinary psychological observation to say that we don't experience the present as a dimensionless moment, a mathematical point which has already passed us by before we have a chance to spot or study it. The "specious" present--the present as it appears to us--is a present within which things "have time" to occur. Right now, we would all say, I am reading you this paper, and you are either listening or daydreaming or coming up with counterobjections. From the point of view that the present is instantaneous, of course, nothing is happening "right now." Within an instant there's no room for an event to take place, no room for any change or motion. We speak of events "unfolding" or "taking their course," of the previous paper as having "been read" and the next one as "scheduled to be read." I hope you can see that it would be impossible to speak this way if the experienced present, the present

in which things happen, didn't have some "stretch" to it. Well, it's only a step from this idea of the present being "stretched" to understanding what I mean by saying that the present moment can also have depth.

We have all, I hope, experienced moments where "time seemed to stand still," as the saying goes. Perhaps one thinks of a moment alone outdoors, bemused by the sublimity of nature; or a moment of romantic or sexual communion; or the times when one was able to fully hear a piece of music or see a work of art. But such moments when time stands still aren't necessarily pleasant: of a trauma or catastrophe we say that "it went on and on," though on the clock maybe just a few minutes have gone by. These are times when the "specious present" is deepened for us and we seem to sink down into it, cut off from any awareness or concern about things past or future. It is the quality of the event taking place, its importance to our life, which determines the degree of depth the moment is felt to have. In the main we live through our time on the surface of its stream and speak of "piling up the days" or of "one damn thing after another." Occasionally, when an event or experience seems to open itself up to us and draw us in, we feel that the stream has been broken, the passage of time stilled and the tedious string of days and years reduced to insignificance by the momentousness--notice the word--of what is happening now. We're wrong, of course: the clock continues to tick, the day continues to turn toward night, we haven't escaped the stream or destroyed its power over us. What has happened is simply that we have experienced a vertical dimension in our present, been enabled to live it more completely while we're in it and recognize its importance for us.

I want to stress that by using the word "importance" I'm not making a value-judgement: the deep moment may be far more disquieting or even excruciating than the time which just passes by. A friend of mine once invented a situation he imagined cast doubt on my notion of vertical time--because he was assuming, you see, that I supposed deep moments always possessed more value or benefit to us than distracted moments. Here's what he said: "A once-great actor who suffered a stroke and has labored to recover his speech and memory makes his first appearance on the stage and before his anxious fans suffers a lapse of memory. The tragedy and inherent significance of the event are there in background functioning as the meaning-giving sense of the context. Under ordinary circumstances the silence merely means a break in development, a lack of skill and a lessening of tension. The actor is flogging his memory, the crowd is stirring; both actor and crowd are involved, but they are not integrated into the situation in accordance with the value (enjoying the play)." When he gave me this example my friend, contrary to his wishes, actually put his

finger on the key point I want to stress about vertical time: it is time experienced as not only out of kilter with the rest of time but often out of kilter with our accepted values and expectations. Time from which we learn. The unforgettable things are most often those we have most trouble fitting into the normal stream of our lives.

Asian disciplines like Vipassana and Zen contain methods for progressively deepening the present moment, learning to pay attention to everything that happens indiscriminately, till it all possesses equal importance and equal unimportance and we are--at least in our attitudes--totally liberated from the tyranny of horizontal time. The East is notorious for downplaying or ignoring history, and for just this reason. European philosophy and science, on the other hand, have bequeathed to us an almost exclusively horizontal concept of time. Life is viewed as a series of stages to be accomplished, a series of contracts to be fulfilled, a mission with a definite start and finish, birth and death. This idea probably had its source in the book of Genesis but received its perfection at the hands of Hollywood: think of how a typical heterosexual relationship is supposed to go: first you date, then go steady, then get engaged, then married, then have kids, then. . . then you might have time, once the kids are grown, for some of those "vertical" moments. Isn't that what retirement is about, earning the right to enjoy the time you have left? Our emphasis on horizontal time is both our peculiar genius and our downfall, since it causes us to spurn deep moments as either childish affectations or unsavory, antisocial hobbies. The ability to be opened by events is hardly respected in our culture: it exhibits a sensitivity which is dangerously close to effeminate and almost certainly useless in the workaday world.

Granted, however, that we have nowadays come to reckon with the power of deep time to some extent and are grudgingly willing to let it affect our hopes and projects, it may be asked (probably is being asked in a lot of your minds) what exactly this distinction between horizontal and vertical time is worth in terms of philosophical understanding. Isn't it just a ponderous way of saying that there are cases where we notice the passing of time less than we do in others, and isn't this a fairly obvious and uninformative fact? It settles nothing about whether time is subjective or objective, public or private, or whether there's any justification for making time a philosophical topic at all. Once when Einstein was asked if he could explain relativity in layman's terms he replied "You sit on a hot stove for a minute and it feels like an hour; you sit next to a pretty woman for an hour and it feels like a minute--that's relativity." Is anything more being said here?

Well, I began with the claim that all theories of time, ancient and modern, have been obvious and uninformative, but that philosophers have tended to concentrate on time regarded as a

straight line on a plane surface and been indifferent to the impression (to use another "vertical" metaphor) different events make on our personalities. The philosophic significance of taking this simple fact into account (along with James' "specious present", also a simple fact) lies, I think, precisely in its potential to help us get rid of that old dilemma of subjective or objective time altogether. So long as time is seen as a series of neutral moments it's up for grabs whether this series belongs to the real world or only to our way of looking at it. But as soon as we admit that events can differ in importance and be "lived" to different degrees, the question of where they take place becomes trivial if not pointless. Obviously our participation in events determines their ultimate shape, and just as obviously events take place without our conscious design or control: the planets follow their courses, the shadow moves across the earth, the hands sweep round the dial. But because deep time is the time which teaches, the depth of time is also the depth of the person. It is alertness, not forgetfulness, that "makes time stand still." To experience vertical time is not to "lose oneself in the moment" but to find--and preserve--the moment within oneself.