

ON LIVING IN TIME

Currently I discover myself temporal, marginal, increasingly ineffective, and definitely “out of it” when I see what is going on in the world around me. Thanks to a number of friends who are about the same age, I know I am not alone in this circumstance. Despite this conclusion, a question has occurred to me; “are there any conclusions available to me that might be of value to set down?”

Though the answer is probably “no”, here goes.

Time, into which we are locked inexorably, is many things to us. First of all, we know that it is relative, and that sometimes it drags, sometimes it flies. But an important appreciation is that one’s life is incredibly short when one considers the age of the universe. That age is now believed to be 13.7 billion years, and a person’s lifetime cannot even be represented as an eyeblink. Yet, while it is possible to affect those who follow us, in practice a lifetime is all the time we have to accomplish whatever we chose to accomplish. It may be that the writer of Ecclesiastes is right about this, as he points out repeatedly that everything that happens eventually passes away to be forgotten.

Despite this situation, I glory that in my lifetime I have done so many things, seen so many marvels, shared with others so many wonderful experiences, and have been so blessed that I envy no one at all. This is truly satisfying, and allows me to face death with a certain acceptance that I wish everyone else could experience. I’m delighted to say that most of my friends can also do this, as they are Christians. That makes all the difference.

There is another point I want to make here--one not necessarily easy to accept by everyone. I believe that if it should happen that we are wrong in our Christian beliefs, we are still much better off for being Christians. (See paragraph two!) *Believing* is a powerful force, whether true. There are many examples of this, so I shall not belabor the point. But I implore you to BELIEVE, no matter what doubts you might have. Great will be the reward!¹

It also happens that if you become a believer on faith alone--preachers tell us

¹ This is part of the plan, and cannot be accidental!

this is THE way--then God shows himself in almost every facet of your life, and the doubts dwindle away--slowly, perhaps, and with me there is always an element of doubt left--but dwindle they do.

Of course I have a continuing bafflement concerning the *hereafter*. If God is responsible for creation, and I believe He is, then He must be outside or beyond time. **Time** is a created quantity, as are mass and energy. They all began with the big bang. So there is no such thing as what happened *before* creation, as there is no sequence without time. If these ideas are true, it seems obvious to me, assuming an afterlife, that we will be outside of time, and therefore in a state that is unimaginable. Speculation is therefore of little value. Suffice it to say that essentially everything we hear about heaven in church and from friends is based on beliefs incredibly short of total truth. A couple of months before my cousin Don Brownlee died, he and I agreed that whatever Heaven is, we do not know. Therefore, it is certain to be a big surprise. I take considerable comfort from this thought.

Now it seems obvious, with some thought, that once one gets beyond childhood, it doesn't really matter much how *long* one lives. Rather it is the *way* one lives that will bring progress, happiness and satisfaction. If life seems short, you are on the right path, for time drags terribly if you are in a situation that you hate. Clearly you need to get your head on straight, and your philosophy for life sharply defined.

This "philosophy of life" thing sounds like a big deal, and it is, but few people realize that they allow others, and random circumstances, to determine it for them. Consider, for example, your concept of time.

Historically, there have been two quite distinct ways in which we regard time. The most ancient one is a view that time is cyclic, and that everything repeats, or will repeat. This is a view that is intuitive for many of us. The sun rises each morning. It goes to the south, and returns north. The full moon occurs at regular intervals. The seasons determine the weather, the growing cycles for plants, the clothes we wear. The animals exist with life cycles, each with a pattern derived from seasons, food cycles, etc. Generations, whether for plants, animals or humans, follow one after another.

Surrounded by these evidences of cycles, how can we possibly consider time

itself as being otherwise? This whole belief system is spelled out remarkably well in the book of Ecclesiastes, and the ultimate conclusion the author reaches is that, since everything repeats, without real change, then there really is no hope for man. We are born, then die, and are as forgotten as a blade of grass that passes into oblivion after a short summer.

A second and more recent concept of time is that it is linear. The past stretches into the distance (usually we see this as “to the left”) and the future is an infinite line to the right. The present is an infinitely thin point that separates the two. Even as we speak, the present slips away. This particular concept of time has formed over many centuries. The Jews, from my views anyway, developed the concept of “time past”. Their past history mattered. But at the time of Christ, the Jews did not have a generally accepted and a very coherent view of the future. It was the Christians who fastened attention on a future. Further, they advanced the idea that an individual’s actions here determined what happened later. So the past and the future were related in a very specific way.

This concept really became generally sensible with the invention of the printing press. We read, and there before us was “linear” thought. One could turn the pages backward or forward at will, reading again of the past, or into the future. Who was the murderer? Turn to the back pages to see. Logic itself flows from the book. A, B, hence C.

Herein lies the law.

These two concepts of time are now so traditional that we accept them without thought, as do our parents, teachers, and friends. Cyclical time has faded in importance and we are removed from the land, and dark skies. Though we are aware of the concept, we mostly live time as linear, and behave that way.

But a most remarkable set of circumstances have caused a brand new concept of time to emerge in my lifetime. I will call this concept a “dynamic present”. It is a third concept of time, and is relatively new. I believe the concept has arisen because it is being regularly taught by many elements of our culture, even though few realize just what is going on.

Consider a typical television evening. One sees the news of the day’s activities, a session with Star Trek, perhaps a movie from the middle or dark ages,

something with dinosaurs. George Washington may be mentioned somewhere, along with Genghis Khan, or Bin Laden, or General Schwarzkopf. There will be stories from Egypt, say, ancient or modern, replays of well-known movies, themselves covering all periods of human history. From all these you may notice that there is almost never any indication of what comes first, which event preceded another, or any particular consequence of an individual's behavior. Time is completely jumbled.

Because of this jumbling, children have few opportunities to make time distinctions. Just who came first does not matter. The emphasis is entirely on the present. The past being a jumble, the future is an unknown, and therefore is of little concern. It is no wonder that our young are many times said to be in the Now Generation.

On one occasion I had the opportunity to discuss this with a good many students at Fudan University, in Shanghai, China. I asked them "What is your concept of time?" Most seemed baffled by the question, but ultimately their descriptions were mostly of cyclical time. They seemed to be not so much into linear time, but did show evidence of the Dynamic Present. I was pleased to gain a view of their culture by their answers. It was clear that a Chinese college student had some real differences from the average American student.

This "Dynamic Present", the third concept of time, seems to me to dominate my grandchildren and great-grandchildren. This certainly is not surprising. We are each being educated in it.

But we old-timers are well aware of cyclic time, and time stretching from the infinitude of the past to the infinitude of the future. Consider time to be an infinite slinky. It is circular, stretches, and can move dynamically. We have an enormous advantage for we can sense and live in three kinds of times at once!

Our comprehension of various concepts of time contributes enormously in making living a massive delight! One should ponder his use of time each day.

But never forget—for us, time is temporal.