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Edited by
Charles M. Sherover

The Human Experience of Time

The Development
of Its Philosophic
Meaning



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Philosophic Meaning

Charles M. Sherover

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To William Barrett

But now the sight of day and night, and the months and the revolutions of the years, have created number, and have given us a conception of time, and the power of enquiring about the nature of the universe; and from this source we have derived philosophy, than which no greater good ever was or will be given by the gods to mortal man. This is the greatest boon of sight . . .

—*Plato*

The feeling of eternity is a hypocritical one, for eternity feeds on time. The fountain retains its identity only because of the continuous pressure of water. Eternity is the time that belongs to dreaming, and the dream refers back to waking life, from which it borrows all its structures. Of what nature, then, is that waking time in which eternity takes root?

—*M. Merleau-Ponty*

Preface

The genesis of this book is to be found in work done under a 1971 special summer grant by the Faculty Research Foundation of the City University of New York, which is gratefully acknowledged. It soon became apparent that much current work being done in the philosophy of time was being pursued in some ignorance of the historic sources of the questions being asked, the issues being discerned, and the problems being raised. It seemed important that an elucidation of the temporalist tradition in Western philosophy might help avoid useless labors and point us to the core of the issues facing us. This interpretive overview is, then, a first stage in my own work concerning some prime issues I see in the development of a systematic temporalism; it is hoped that it will prove to be of value to other laborers in that same vineyard.

I feel a special kind of gratitude to two persons not directly connected with this book who nevertheless have proven very important to its completion. F. Joachim Weyl, a mathematician with a philosophic perspective, gave me warm encouragement, at a crucial early period, to proceed with this exploration which goes in a direction quite different from his own. The dedication which J. T. Fraser has given to the import of the study of time, and his voiced encouragements, have been important in maintaining my own perseverance along the way.

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Meredith Crossman by her clerical assistance. My good friend, Bruce Wilshire joins William Barrett in always being ready to counsel with me and to provide advice that is not always congenial but is never to be ignored. I owe a vote of thanks to Hugh van Dusen for his special kindnesses, and to the folks at New York University Press (and to their resolutely anonymous adviser), for their patience, understanding, and indulgences.

This book, following a format suggested by that of Russell's book on Leibniz, is a somewhat unorthodox compendium of anthological selections together with my own connecting essays. It seems to me that many of our perplexities and our understandings of time emerge from a continuity of development that is seldom observed; its stages have so rarely been looked at together that the ample documentation provided by 'selections' became necessary. To the publishers who have made copyrighted material available for this purpose, I am, of course, grateful; specific credits have been indicated as footnotes on the first page of each selection.

Perhaps needless to say but nevertheless necessary, without any diminution of gratitude, the responsibility for what has been and has not been said within these pages is mine alone.

C.M.S.

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Contents

Preface	xi
Acknowledgments	xiii
I. Foreword: In the Beginning	1
1 Genesis: The Time of Creation	8
2 Heraclitus: The Law of Change	11
II. Time and Motion	15
3 Plato: The Creation of Time	40
4 Aristotle: Perceiving Time and Self	46
5 Aristotle: Time as Measure	49
6 Plotinus: Time and Engendered Being	63
7 Augustine: Experiential Time	81
III. Time and Understanding	97
8 Locke: The Idea of Duration	122
9 Leibniz: Time as Relational	134
10 Kant: The Primacy of Time	143
11 Kant: The Temporalization of Concepts	153
IV. Time and Reality	157
12 Hegel: Time and Becoming	183
13 Lotze: Time and Process	193
14 Bergson: Time as Lived Duration	218
15 Alexander: Time and Space	239
IV. The Analysis of Temporal Concepts	261
16 McTaggart: "The Unreality of Time"	278
17 Russell: "On the Experience of Time"	297

18	Reichenbach: The Primacy of Physical Time	315
19	Whitehead: Two Kinds of Time Relatedness	330
	VI. The Significance of Experiential Time	347
20	James: "The Perception of Time"	368
21	Peirce: Futurity, Meaning, and Action	384
22	Royce: Time: Concept and Will	395
23	Santayana: "Sentimental Time"	407
24	Dewey: "Time and Individuality"	419
	VII. The Structure of Experiential Time	437
25	Piaget: Developing the Concept of Time	466
26	Husserl: The Constitution of the Present	484
27	Minkowski: The Presence of the Past	504
28	Heidegger: The Priority of the Future	519
	VIII. The Open Agenda	549
29	Collingwood: "Some Perplexities About Time"	558
30	McKeon: "Time and Temporality"	572
	Notes	581
	Index	593

I.

Foreword: In the Beginning

“In the beginning,” Genesis tells us, “God created the heavens and the earth.” The creation is presented as having required six sequential stages, the first of which was devoted to establishing the cycle of light and darkness, of day and night. Time was created by God at the outset of the creation; it was intrinsically connected with his creation as its concomitant or its form. Time was not only an initially created aspect of a created world; time was used by God for the entire process of first creating this world and then resting from this time-consuming divine labor.

If time was seen as useful for God, it was certainly necessary for men. Time was, in the development of biblical thought, not a neutral container of events, but somehow intrinsic to their essential nature. Time was to be an important guide to men concerning the propriety or appropriateness of possible alternate actions which, whatever else be true of them, had an integral temporal component. Thus, in Ecclesiastes, we are told, “For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted; a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up. . . .”

The New Testament, although composed in a later Hellenistic world, carried this theme forward; time was portrayed as linear, as history, as the vehicle for fulfillment, as the carrier of meaning. It opens with an account of ancestral chronology, focuses on a set of historic events, and ends with prophecy. From Genesis through Revelation, there is a continuity of movement from an unrepeatable past to a yet pending future; articulated at every point is an “affirmation and realization of the possibilities of life through time rather than by cultic destruction of time in favor of eternity. . . . Each day of life was one day closer to its fulfillment, and one day further from its creation.”¹

In its beginning, the Western philosophic tradition, in contrast, did

not countenance the notion of a beginning. As an aspect of the world, time was itself seen as eternal. The world was conceived as an ongoing process without beginning or end and time was the mark of the rhythm or pattern of the continuity of change within it.

Philosophy arose out of the attempt of some Ionian Greeks to understand and explain the patterns of change which they discerned in the world about them. Starting from the testimony of everyday sense perception, they realized that every physical entity was engaged in some process of change, that no perceptual object was really static. Turning from the reports of sense to the considerations of reason, they tried to understand the nature of the divergent patterns of change before them which constituted the world they experienced. Probably patterning their understanding of the regularities they beheld on the cycle of the seasons, they concluded that each of these patterns was recurrent without any genesis or finality. Explanation of particular changes was to be found in some rationally conceived principle or law which was discerned, not in the particular perception itself, but only by generalization in the thinker's reasoning. The visible object, the seen, was to be explained in terms of the thought which was literally invisible and unseen. A somehow continuing principle, reason, or law was to be discerned in the regularly recurrent changes in nature. Behind the diversity of sense experiences, there was to be found a unity in thought. Without any denigration of the many-ness of things, without any separation of reason from nature, explanation was to be found in common unifying principles, patterns, or laws which were understood to underlay the multiplicity of particular changing things and bound the many into one.

The convention is that Thales, an inhabitant of Miletus, the port city of Ephesus in the Greek settlement of Asia Minor, initiated the philosophic quest for a unifying first rational principle of natural events. Noting that water is the one natural element which can readily be transformed, by heat or cold, into a vapor like air or a solid like earth, he apparently reasoned that it must thereby be the prime element. As such it was to be in terms of the transformations of the state of water that the patterns of changes in physical nature were to be explained or understood.

Another Miletian, Anaximander, flourished about twenty years later—about 560 B.C. Facing the question of the 'wherefrom?', the

source of the plurality of things in nature, he noted that they each came into being, lasted, and then disintegrated. He sought the common ‘matter’ or substance out of which all particular things were generated and into which they disappeared after disintegration or death. “The Non-Limited is the original material of existing things,” he concluded. And the processes of nature, which govern the patterns of generation and decay of the particular entities comprising the world, were regularly ordered and to be understood “according to necessity . . . [and] according to the arrangement of Time.”²

Perhaps more than anyone, it was Heraclitus of Ephesus, who gave the fullest expression to this pre-Socratic Greek conception of time as the mark of ordered change in a dynamic natural world. In the fragments of his writing which have come down to us, we find these ideas forcefully enunciated and brought together in a way that suggests cardinal themes of the development which followed. Contrary to the usually facile textbook description of an anarchic apostle of unbridled change, Heraclitus recognized the pervasiveness of change in the visible world while insisting that it be understood in its complexity in terms of an apparently unchanging Law (or *Logos*), which guided all changes, and brought them into the unity of the world (see Frags. 1, 2, 45, 50). Seeing the *Logos*, which binds all diversity within the world into the unity that is the world—as encompassing the multiplicity of all the changes constituting experience—he directed attention to the essential dynamicity and continuity of change in the world of nature to which we belong.

This world of nature was conceived as somehow eternal, without beginning or end, as uncreated, as ruled by its Law or *Logos*, which mandates the kinds or patterns of change permeating it (see Frags. 30, 103). Behind all change, all strife, all conflict—which mark the world as we experience it—there is the “hidden harmony” of the *Logos* (see Frag. 54), the law of change which is itself changeless, the law of generation which is itself ungenerated, the law of decay which is itself immune to decay.

Heraclitus is best known for the focus he placed on the dynamic continuity of change we experience (see Frags. 8, 12, 51, 53, 65, 91, 126). This dynamicity does, indeed, present many examples of serial order although the primary notion of change is that, not of development, but of change of quality between contrary states.³ Fire, the

fourth of the Greek elements, which Thales had apparently overlooked, was regarded as either a symbol of the dynamicity of nature or as, in fact, its cause or true expression (see Frags. 30, 64, 67). But, when we move from our perceptual experience to our understanding of it, we find the pervasive nature of the *Logos*, wholly immanent as the “hidden harmony” which keeps disparate multiplicity in functioning ordered unity. The uncreated and continuing cyclical process of change constitutes the internal temporal nature of the world.

Hardly mentioned, time is always implicitly involved. Used to mark out the stages of serial order, it seems to have been conceived primarily in terms of the periodicities or pulsings of the regular cycles of these series of change which we now term processes (see Frags. 31, 52, 67, 91). Used by reason in its understanding of these constituting changes, rather than the governor of reason itself, we see here the dim beginning of many philosophic themes as well as that of the consideration of time which, articulated quite differently by Plato and by Aristotle, served to shape the subsequent discussion.

For each of them was to bring a notion of time, as Heraclitus had already implicitly done, into a spatial world in order to comprehend its internal order. In contrast, the biblical tradition had urged that the spatial world, and the events within it, be seen in a frame of serial time which provides its source of significance, movement, and meaning.⁴

However disparate these two conceptions of time may have been, they share in one paradox: the rooting of time in the supratemporal or the timeless. For the biblical God, who created time and was able to enter into it and use it, was yet prior to its numbered days. And the Heraclitean *Logos*, although continually expressed in the ordered cycles marking the changes within the world, was yet their governor. For neither, however, did their view of the world of time and change imply any suggestion of ontological illusion or any diminution of its reality or its being.

As the biblical and Greek traditions came together in the later days of the Roman Empire to form the merged common core of the Western intellectual tradition, their similarities and disagreements provided the root source of the dialectic marking subsequent discussion. This is particularly true of the disparate approaches they brought to the interpretation of the time of human experience and the paradoxes which were engendered.

The prime paradox, of course, was the subsequent denigration of

the import of time itself. The standard reading of the historic development of philosophic thought is to see a continuing subordination of time to eternity, of concrete temporal experience to non-temporal abstractions—concepts, logics, categories—conceived to be supratemporal or more real. Having accepted the distinction between ‘reality’ and ‘appearance’, already implicit in Heraclitus, the notion of ‘appearance’ was somehow identified, not with ‘real appearing’ but with ‘illusion’; in contrast to the alleged timelessness of eternal truths, which were, of course, the thinker’s real concern, time was relegated to illusion while thought continually aspired to reaching beyond it. It has, indeed, with some truth, been observed that “when philosophers who have dominated occidental philosophy thought of time at all, they put it on the level of appearance [illusion] and left it there with contempt.”⁵ This outcome is, indeed, ironic for a civilization, a culture, a tradition, whose historic roots place awareness of time and change at the foundation of their concerns.

If a prime function of philosophic thought is to interpret and comprehend the nature and meaning of human experience—not merely the content but also the experiencing itself—that thinking needs to be true to the experience within which it arises. Our experiencing is indeed sequential, marked by periodicity, development, and change. To denigrate time, then, is to denigrate the experience which we seek to understand. Arising as it does out of human temporal experience, philosophic thinking cannot come to terms with itself until it begins to take the time of its experience as at least the perduring context within which it is and it functions.

If we determine to take time seriously, we need to reconsider the ways in which time has been examined in the developing philosophic heritage that is now ours. We reread the old texts with the question of time as our guiding concern and seek to uncover something of the original thinking that was there expressed. Doing so often throws a standard text into a new perspective, casts a different light on the other work of the particular thinker, perhaps calls for a systematic reevaluation of his thought, and yields grounds for a new understanding of philosophic history and of the development over time of philosophic thought. With the question of time as our guide, we rediscover its central, if usually veiled, import in our intellectual tradition.

If the question of time is as fundamental as the two diverse roots of

our heritage indicate, we can see why it has implications beyond itself and for most philosophic inquiries. We then need to retrace the prime landmarks which marked the development of the questions which concern us today. Because experiential time has so often been lost sight of, even when it is implicitly invoked, it is crucial not only to sketch out these prime stages of philosophical development but also to place a large emphasis on the original texts themselves, for they carry the burden of history and interpretation. Too often too many of us have relied on fourth- or fifth-hand reports instead of going back to the texts themselves to see for ourselves what their authors intended to say. Very often facing the original texts throws a new light on issues involved and permits us to see, from our own perspective, what might not have been so readily seen before.

The presentation is, then, primarily chronological and thematic. We see that each discernible group of thinkers managed to define together a core issue which framed the center of the dialogue bringing them together, and the questions they proposed to those who followed them. The gathering together of separate thinkers in a given period has been marked more by the common questions they felt were important to ask than by agreement on any set of answers they might have produced. This is not to suggest that subsequent discussions ignored earlier questions or topics of focus. Rather, intellectually responsible thinkers felt obligated to bring earlier questions into newer contexts so as to reexamine them in terms of inquiries regarded as even more encompassing or fundamental.

Informed and responsible discussion is not rootless; it generally becomes more complex as it develops; it does not cut itself off from its roots, but sees itself as obligated to explain what may have once been taken as 'obvious' and to integrate the insights of earlier thinkers into its own hopefully more mature perspective. Even then, when we seek to focus on questions of contemporary discussions—and the second half of this book is concerned with philosophers who have played important roles in the thinking of *this* twentieth century—we need to recognize the pluralism of approaches and the common root out of which they have sprung.

This is to say that in order to understand the contexts, areas of agreement and of concern today, we need to look back and take in the development out of our own beginnings. It was a wise man who had