

Table of Contents

- I. Time Defined
- II. Past, Present, and Future
- III. The Future Provides Insignificance and Disillusionment
- IV. The Future Brings Uncertainty
- V. Nostalgia and Lack Self-Trust
- VI. Uncertainty and Unconsciousness
- VII. Timelessness
- VIII. How I Can Live with Time

I. Time Defined

Time seems to me an unspoken truth, and although it is obviously intangible and in my attempts to capture this concept, I realized that it is ever-present yet inexplicable. As I first began to think about time, I realized how inherent my knowledge of time was for me and without using the word “time” (or some substitute) it was difficult for me to go about describing what time is. I still kind of flounder with how time passes through my life. It is astounding to me that there is no stopping it, yet it is invisible, and potentially not even real. As time is omnipresent, yet difficult to get a hold on, I wonder how my perception of time affects my life. So, I am looking into some of the ways that time is objectively captured through language.

According to Einstein, time is relative, in that it cannot be perceived but must be associated with motion or a lack of motion. Time does not exist objectively and is more a human construct, a fundamental intellectual structure that inherently exists: “Time cannot be directly perceived but must be reconstructed by the brain” (Underwood).

Time is defined in the Oxford English Dictionary as “the indefinite continued progress of existence and events in the past, present, and future regarded as a whole.” But this encompassing definition conflicts with Einstein’s theory that the past, present, and future are all occurring simultaneously, and perceiving time as events and objects move through nor to any entity that ‘flows’ instead a fundamental intellectual structure within which humans sequence and compare events” (Burnham).

II. Past, Present, and Future

Because each person’s perception of time is so unique and specific, the pace at which people live their lives can be substantially affected—consciously or subconsciously—by the way they perceive time. Someone who is far more present-oriented would most likely live a more relaxed life where they are seeking pleasure and happiness immediately, rather than preparing to be happy in the future. Hence, they value the present far more. People who are more oriented towards the future, and who feel that they should be preparing for happiness in the future, probably value the present way less and perhaps lose sight of what they really want, and how their happiness really takes shape.

The present, past, and future is fascinating to me because of my own inability to grasp it. Einstein’s views on “time as relative” battle with my inherent perception of time as continued progression; it is still impossible for me to imagine all three happening simultaneously. I find these concepts overwhelming. It is difficult for me to recognize and absorb myself in the present. It is this incredible, absurd moment that is truly inescapable; no matter how much I think about the past or the future I’m still in the present. This present moment is fleeting, always becoming the past and the future becoming the present. It is strange that the present is all that exists; yet it seems to not exist simultaneously. The past and the future only exist in the present mind, as memory or expectation, and one is constantly in the present.

Although the present moment is inescapable, it also seems to not really exist. Even when one begins to speak of the present, their conversation is already in the past. As described in the Dictionary of Philosophy,

“Often it is said that it is the present or now that shifts to ever-later times. This quickly leads to absurdity. ‘The present’ and ‘now,’ like ‘this time,’ are used to refer to a moment of time. Thus, to say that the present shifts to late times entails that this very moment of time – the present – will become some other moment of time and thus cease to be identical with itself!”

Because the present moment is so intangible, I often feel that I am coasting along the future and not the present. It is frustrating that although I’m stumbling through the uncertainty of the future, those moments become solidified and certain as soon as they recede into the past.

Because I feel that I am not only constantly *in* the future but also looking *to* the future, then the future is all there really is. So in this sense, I am not engaged in the present. But that previous statement obviously doesn’t apply to every moment, and those moments are what I live for. Moments such as these could be described as the specious present: “the short duration of which we are immediately and incessantly sensible” (Anderson). When one is incessantly sensible they maybe partially forget or disregard their sense of time and the future. But these moments are hard to achieve so one must be practical in their acquisition or participation.

Now comes the question of how to find the balance between hedonism, the constant pursuit of pleasure and being future-oriented. Although hedonism seems to have some negative connotations, it seems to me that moments in the present are often entirely moments of pleasure, or perhaps pain or sorrow. In moments such as these one is so consumed with emotion that all else (including time) seems to fade.

As I struggle to escape my awareness of the future, only substantial emotion or preparation seems to overcome this. I must pursue what I am honestly passionate towards and what has potential to be engaging. And such activities can be presently engaging but also valuable for the future as well. Cooking serves as a good analogy for this as it is essentially preparation, but with a goal always at hand. As one cooks he is ultimately preparing to eat what he is cooking so the future is fairly prominent in this practice. Yet, the process of stirring sauce or dicing onions is enjoyable in itself. The process becomes the product, yet the conventional product is still enjoyable.

Although activities that I am interested in do not always achieve timelessness, I have no choice but to pursue them as they are all that could potentially alleviate my misgivings towards the future. Even if preparation or the process doesn’t seem immediately rewarding to me, I can almost pretend that it does. “Pretend” is not necessarily the right word—more so suspend my expectations for the present to be engaging and let the future sweep me away. For example, I like to paint; so I could be making a painting, employing my awareness of myself as one who likes to paint, knowing that I am increasing my painting skills or my painting experience. Knowing that my painting will soon be in the past can project me to the certainty of what has come and gone.

I wish to find the balance between seeking out what I am passionate about and find engaging. If I appreciate something, its value will carry into the future and I will engage in that practice again.

III. The Future Provides Insignificance and Disillusionment

I have already delved into how the future may dominate the present. The knowledge of possibility in the future not only desensitizes the present, at the same time it makes the present seem essential to success in the future.

As said in *Einstein's Dreams*, "In a world of one day the whole world is equal." If I had only tomorrow to live, I would live it quite differently than I do now, thinking that I have quite a while. And in that last day all preparation and expectation for the future dissipates, and I would pursue whatever would make me happy that day, whatever I truly wanted. I feel that this demonstrates how I live in the present in disillusionment because of what I perceive should be accomplished in the future. For example: College vs. Failure. Parents might say that one must receive a formal college education or your life is wasted. Many aspirations are twisted because of what society may expect one to be; I am likely pursuing a skewed sense of happiness under false dichotomies.

Even though I can address that I may not be as presently responsible as I could be, I tend to neglect the importance of the present because I know that I could probably do it in the future. If I'm not even entirely happy or satisfied in the present why should I better myself? I can better myself tomorrow. That is obviously cynical because I do attempt to better myself everyday. I attempt to better myself because I feel like I should. I strive for betterment, because if I don't there's no point. If success and happiness hadn't been recommended to me, who knows if I would pursue them. I probably would.

Through my awareness of time I neglect moral responsibility. Not only does my knowledge of the future allow me to neglect present action, but the knowledge that my life is very short and I'll soon become a trivial blip in history, makes me feel as though there's no point to morality and responsibility.

IV. The Future Brings Uncertainty

My awareness of time also contributes to my uncertainty towards the future. I possess a general uncertainty towards time because my lack of a comprehensive understanding of what exactly time is. I find the idea that my time is limited and that I have no idea what happens after death (or what was before my life) overwhelming. These previous uncertainties, combined with my inability to define the relationship between the present and the future, lead towards a general uncertainty.

In *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*, author Rebecca Solnit describes the relationship between present/future and uncertainty: "To be fully present is to be capable of mystery and uncertainty." Solnit suggests that one learn to collaborate with chance. In order for me to be comfortable with the constant transition from the present to the future, I must be able to cope with my doubts about what's to come.

Although the future is uncertain for all, I feel that my fear of the future stems from my impulsiveness and lack of self-trust. I appreciate impulsiveness because it allows me to convey my immediate and most genuine intentions (hence being myself) yet the ways in which I compromise my integrity with this manner of interaction make me fear myself. Of course, the relationship between logic and instinct is precarious.

V. Nostalgia and Lack Self-Trust

Because I am forced to deal with the mystery of uncertainty, I try my best to do so. It can be terrifying, but I often do a decent job of truly reflecting on who I am. Due to this reflection, I greatly admire my past self when I do well with uncertainty of the future; I cherish the experience and interactions that this brought about. Because I feel nostalgic for my previous relations with uncertainty, the uncertainty of the future is painful; I may not be able to repeat what I am fond of in the past.

Because I inherently don't entirely trust myself, perhaps because I neglect morality, I fear that I will not be able to bring about what I feel nostalgia for in the future. I appreciate the beauty of the past because it is complete and irrevocable (although memory can be unreliable) and I can appreciate it from afar, whereas the beauty of experiences yet to come is intangible, unreliable and potentially non-existent. This is why I must "collaborate with chance." I must ease myself and try to float along the river of the future, perhaps becoming so oblivious to relative human constructs that I forget I'm in a river.

VI. Uncertainty and Unconsciousness

In *Field Guide to Getting Lost* Solnit describes Socrates' response to uncertainty: "You can know the unknown because you remember it. You already know what seems unknown. You have been here before, but only when you were someone else." Because one's personality and identity are constantly transforming it can be difficult to recognize mysteries that one has solved previously, through a different lens. This may be entering the realm of magical thought, which I hope exists, but... combined with Einstein's theory that the past, present, and future are all happening simultaneously, hence the future has already happened, an analogy could be drawn between these ideas and the link, or separation, between the conscious and subconscious mind.

Einstein speculates that the future has already happened. I cannot perceive this as possible because of my inherent ability to understand time as a process, but I would like to think that one can re-assess what seems uncertain by searching in the far reaches of their mind. I'm not suggesting that I could tell the future, but perhaps through some utilization of the unconscious mind I could become more comfortable with my conscious perception of the future. By embracing this unconscious or unusual relationship to the chaos of what is to come, I could exist in the present and future in a more beneficial way. Jung made the claim that, "The unconscious mind of man sees correctly even when conscious reason is blind and impotent" and that, as far as moral sense, aesthetic taste and intellectual judgment go, is completely neutral." Through my attempts to imagine and reach for my unconscious understanding of the future, I can escape my "intellectual judgments" so as to flow more easily into the future, or be less fearful of the mystery of the future. It all circles back to collaborating with chance and accepting myself. I want to trust my controlled conscious mind and my "mysterious" unconscious to respond accordingly (and hopefully morally) to whatever comes my way.

VII. Timelessness

Even though I want to cope with my knowledge of the future, what I really want is to achieve moments where my awareness of time is no longer present, and I simply enjoy what I'm doing. When my conscious knowledge of my position in time has disappeared, time ceases to exist. Einstein said that time is relative and a human construct; my time only exists when I am conscious of it.

When I am experiencing the specious present or when I am substantially engaged I have potentially achieved timelessness. The past and memory can be timeless in that what has happened in the past is completed. It is definite and solid. What happened in the past will never be repeated exactly. It is done; it will not know the present or the future ever again. The past is always becoming more distant but what actually happened will always be the same. Emotion often accompanies experience, so however one remembers or distorts events in the past with present emotion may be more truthful or profound than what literally happened. When one is in the present and has lost themselves within themselves, they are purely sensible, instinctual; this may be a form of unconsciousness.

One can reduce—or elevate—himself to a moment where he is moving and navigating so honestly that he has transcended consciousness and metacognition (the ability to think about one's thoughts). Not that he has forgotten how to think about his own thoughts, more so that one is comfortable with his response to his position in time. With this acceptance, misgivings towards time disappear, and time disappears.

VIII. How I Can Live with Time

For me to exist in a world where I perceive time to exist, I need to be comfortable with the magical and mysterious motivation to live. I must accept that I cannot take hold of the present or the future. Inevitably, I will participate in both, so I need to make the best of it. I need to come to terms with the fact that I want to be happy, however I may come to define that word. I must be able to cope with the future and then appreciate the future. I must pursue the things I love, accept that they are valuable, and dedicate myself to them. I cannot forget the future, so I must brave it.

Bibliography

Andersen, Holly; Rick Grush. *A brief history of time-consciousness: historical precursors to James and Husserl*. *Journal of the History of Philosophy*. Retrieved 2008-02-02.

Audi, Robert. *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995. Print.

Burnham, Douglas : Staffordshire University (2006). "Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1716) Metaphysics – 7. Space, Time, and Indiscernibles"

Jung, C. G., Jolande Jacobi, and R. F. C. Hull. *Psychological Reflections*. London: Routledge and K. Paul, 1971. Print.

Lightman, Alan P. *Einstein's Dreams*. New York: Pantheon, 1993. Print.

Solnit, Rebecca. *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*. New York: Viking, 2005. Print.

Underwood, G., RA Swain (1973). "Selectivity of attention and the perception of duration".