The Lloyd Davies Philosophy Prize

Is anything special about the present moment?

“What day is it?” asked Pooh.
“It’s today,” squeaked Piglet.
“My favourite day,” said Pooh.”
A.A. Milne¹

We often seem to focus on the present. People say things like ‘seize the day’ (or Horace’s ‘carpe diem’) or ‘live in the moment’ and, most pertinently, that ‘there is no time like the present’. But is this actually true? Is the present any different to the past or the future?

Albert Einstein certainly did not think so. In a letter to the widow of his colleague Michele Besso, he clearly states that ‘the distinction between past, present and future is only an illusion, even if a stubborn one”². He came to this seemingly counter-intuitive conclusion based upon the mathematical implications of his life’s work – the Theory of Relativity.

The Special Theory of Relativity (1905) undermined the concept of universal simultaneity. In other words, according to the theory, the present is different for different observers. As such, even if for a single observer the present is special, that person’s ‘now’ will appear as another observer’s past, and it will appear as the future to a third. For Einstein then, just as in space there is no single place that is universally ‘here’; in time there are no distinct categories of ‘past’, ‘present’ and ‘future’. Past events survive, future events already exist, and there is no objective flow of time from one state to another.

Then, in the subsequent General Theory of Relativity (1916), Einstein found that in order to explain some of the fundamental problems of the universe (for example, how gravity could act over vast distances) he had to make time equivalent to space by configuring it as a dimension of the universe. This is what he called ‘space-time’. By seeing time as just another spatial dimension, the present simply becomes a coordinate in that dimension. The co-ordinate has no greater privilege than any other coordinate. So with this combination of the ‘relative now’ and the conversion of time into a spatial dimension, the universe could be described as a four-dimensional ‘block’ and, since this ‘block universe’ could be theoretically navigated along all of its dimensions, all times become equivalent. This means that there is no such thing as an objective present or now – or one particular time.

¹ From Winnie the Pooh by A.A. Milne

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This idea of a ‘block universe’ was something that had been explored philosophically before the publication of the General Theory of Relativity by J.M.E. McTaggart. McTaggart considered two different concepts of how time could work. They were what he called the A Series and the B Series\(^3\). The A Series models time in relation to the present moment. This is similar to describing time in terms of yesterday, today and tomorrow – with all moments relative to the present. The A Series seems to be more intuitive by suggesting time passes as it flows from future through the present to the past, and supports ideas of a unique present moment. Some A theorists argue it is obvious that the A series is true as we experience the passage of time and change. This could be why the everyday sayings quoted at the beginning of this essay – ‘carpe diem’, ‘live for the moment’, ‘there is no time like the present’ - support the idea that the present is a unique and special time, and why it may appear to be clearly true to us. However, can intuition really support any theory of time? Can we really feel what type of time we live in? Some supporters of the A Series have argued that we can experience the passing of time. For example, Arthur Prior in his essay ‘Thank Goodness That’s Over’\(^4\), suggests that we must experience it in order for us to be thankful, upset or worried when something is finished. For Prior this shows that time must flow because if it did not, this sentiment would not make sense.

The B Series, on the other hand, is similar to Einstein’s block theory with all times being equivalent. In this model moments would be described independently as in Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday etcetera relative to the special position of the observer e.g. time zones. The B theory says that there is no such thing as the present, there is no real passage of time and all times exist equally. Some B theorists dismiss the arguments from experience, for example Dr Simon Prosser argues there can be no experience of time passing\(^5\). Dr Prosser asks us to consider which of our experiences are the experiences of time passing? He argues that we cannot explain a unique, discrete experience of time passing in the same way we can explain a unique experience of anything else e.g. a friend, an apple, a football etcetera. In essence, Dr Prosser has argued that our experience of time cannot fulfil this uniqueness constraint.

McTaggart himself dismissed both models due to what’s known as ‘McTaggart’s paradox’. He thought that the A Series was paradoxical because any given moment would have to be capable of being past, present and future (although not simultaneously). He also thought that B Series, with its static, predetermined model of time, was incapable of explaining change. As a result McTaggart came to the startling conclusion that the entire idea of time is an illusion. So for Einstein, Dr Prosser and McTaggart, the answer to our question is clearly ‘no – there is nothing special about the present’.

Other people disagreed. Famously, when Einstein was awarded the Nobel Prize for Physics in 1921, it was not for Relativity because, as the judges explained, “the famous philosopher Henri Bergson in Paris has challenged this theory”\(^6\).

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\(^3\) From YouTube: The Philosophy Tube: Does Time Pass

\(^4\) Quotes on The Philosophy Tube: Does Time Pass

\(^5\) Simon Prosser Lecture at Durham University

In fact Henri Bergson broadly accepted the mathematics of the Theory of Relativity but he rejected the implications that were being derived from it. To explain his position, Bergson makes clear distinctions between the way in which time is described in different contexts. He thought that there is a measurable ‘clock time’ of the physicist, there is a psychological time that humans experience but there is also durée. (Durée is the description of time that Einstein famously dismissed as being an artificial ‘philosopher’s time’.)

For Bergson, the problem with such scientific analysis was that the measured time it dealt with (‘clock time’ as he called it) was not the real time that we experience as humans. In fact he believed that the actual process of measuring and analysing time changes it from its true nature to something much less real. Real time (what he called durée) is inaccessible to mathematics because, by trying to scientifically analyse time, we have to spatialise it (in precisely the way Einstein does with his concept of space-time). So, he believed that the scientific, Einsteinian, view of time is biased on a misconception - it superimposes spatial concepts onto time and grows into a distorted version of the real thing. Bergson’s durée simply cannot be broken-up, sequenced and measured because by doing this we change ‘real time’ into ‘clock time’.

So although Bergson accepted the mathematics models of ‘physical time’ in the Theory of Relativity, he did not accept the whole view that people derived from it. As Bergson’s said: ‘(s)cience was not wrong – it just couldn’t claim explanatory rights over human life’⁷. For Bergson there is no pre-determination, no block universe. For him space is purely the domain of inert matter, whereas ‘pure time’, which requires the presence an observer, cannot possibly be equated with other physical dimensions. Crucially for Bergson, what his philosophy explains is an instinctive truth of everyday ‘lived time’, where the difference between past and future is evident. In other words, he can explain change whereas as we have seen, for Einstein ‘time’s arrow’ doesn’t exist.

For Bergson time is continuous, indivisible and is realised at the point of confrontation between the material universe and human consciousness, the meeting point between mind and matter. He believed that at this meeting point (the present) the past is determined but not the future. This contingent future allows for free will and what he called ‘creative evolution’. Crucially for Bergson the ‘present moment’ is not a phenomenon of measured time but of durée and, yes, the present is special.

Interestingly though, Bergson also recognised that we could not not regard this conscious present as a single point in time. To explain this he asked people to consider how we listen to music. If the present were simply a unique point we would just hear individual notes of the music and not be able to recognise the tune. To hear a tune our consciousness of the present must be extended to some extent into the past. This idea was further examined by one of Bergson’s supporters, the American philosopher William James. James described the idea of a present that is stretched as the

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⁷ Quoted in Canales (2015) The Physicist and the Philosopher
‘specious present’. The ‘specious present’ for James is ‘the short duration of which we are immediately and incessantly sensible’.

Seeing time as interwoven with consciousness, was important for another of the giants of continental philosophy – Martin Heidegger. For Heidegger, more than any other thinker, it was important to focus fully upon ‘the privilege of present at-hand’. Heidegger’s goal was to analyse what makes time and the nature of experience with his broad conclusion being that ‘human life does not happen in time but rather is time itself’\(^8\). In contrast to Bergson, Heidegger places his emphasis in ‘being rather than beings’. As Simon Critchley explains, ‘for Heidegger, the present is not some endless series of now points that I watch flowing by. Rather, the present is something that I can seize hold of and resolutely make my own’\(^9\).

From both Heidegger and Bergson therefore we can see how the nature of the present is an important factor in determining the reality of ‘free will’. Both philosophers reject the deterministic view of the universe Einstein represented. The two philosophers believe that it is free will to some extent that makes the present special, the freedom to change the future. We may be able to draw a lot of similarities between the debate surrounding free will and the question of this essay.

Free will, just as the A series, has often been argued from experience, we all feel as if we could have made a different decision in the same situation and this has often led to the belief in it. However, just as for time, a lot are not convinced by this. For example, Immanuel Kant believed free will was only possible outside time and space, suggesting time is inherently linked to this topic. Bergson of course disagrees and thinks that Kant has confused space and time, just like Einstein, to develop the idea that human action is determined. From as early as his doctoral thesis ‘time and free will’ which has often been seen as a response to Kant’s claims, Bergson rejected the link between space and time. Bergson argues nothing within duration can be the cause of anything else within it and again claims there is a confusion between time and space.

To conclude, this debate has become too much of ‘the scientist vs the philosopher’ and they can both be compatible. Whilst it is true that Einstein amongst other scientists have seemed to reject the uniqueness of the present through ‘logic and reason’ of mathematics, the mathematics are not wrong. What is wrong is the framing of what they are measuring. They have misunderstood what time really is by spatializing it and superimposing discrete experience on a continuous flow. The debate not the rationality of science and mathematics versus philosophy it is about the understanding of the fundamentals of time. Bergson’s view can still be compatible with the science. The scientific models of course do work in analysing what they call ‘time’, but it is not the real thing the fundamental duration ‘durée’ that flows.

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\(^8\) Quoted in Canales (2015) *The Physicist and the Philosopher*.


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The reason the present moment is a special time is due to the opportunity it represents, the opportunity for us within it to change the future. This really sums up the quote from Winnie the Pooh, the reason today could be 'better' than any other day is because it represents the opportunity to create reality in the ‘unreal’ future. Yesterday is unchanging and tomorrow is ‘unreal’ we can only truly exist as free beings within the present and the now.

**Bibliography**

YouTube - The Philosophy Tube: Does Time Pass https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EnH7V4k9-0M