Independent Project

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Introduction

"When then is time? Provided that no one asks me, I know. If I want to explain it to an inquirer, I do not know."

St Augustine, *The Confessions*.

While time is defined in the Cambridge Dictionary (2021) as the 'indefinite continued progress of existence and events in the past, present and future regarded as a whole", the concept itself is a lot more complex, as noted by St Augustine above. This complex nature of the concept is something that fascinates me, with it being something we experience everyday, yet when you dig deeper down into it, you find it holds a lot more than it first seems. I am especially interested in the concept of 'now', and what happens when time is distorted into something new and different from how we usually experience it.

Throughout this essay, I aim to look at time, how it has been studied using science, art, and literature, and the differing and evolving beliefs about it through the ages and in different cultures. My essay is split into four parts. The first chapter looks at time as change, and the progression of time. The second chapter looks at time as distortion, and the different perceptions of time. The third chapter looks at time as now, and how present time works, while the fourth chapter looks at time as only now, and explores the concept of presentism.

Time as Change

Time is in a constant state of change. It is continuously going forward, and it is impossible for it to stop or go back. We even measure it as the reference of change. (Rovelli, 2018) Originally with sundials, we measured it as the change of the suns position in the sky, and later with the invention of more and more accurate clocks, we measure it in the change of mechanical workings. (Foer, 2008) But these are both inventions that give a form to something we were already aware of. The sun rising and setting every day, the change in the seasons as the Earth spins, the faces of those around us growing ever older. We see the change that time brings all around us every day.

Tehching Hsieh's *One Year Performance 1980-1981: Time Clock Piece* is an example of someone recording this change in time. For one year Hsieh recorded his presence in his Manhattan Studio by, on the hour, every hour, punching himself in on a time clock. This ran from April 11th, 1980 to April 11th, 1981. As he did this, he also took a photograph of himself. He shaved his head before the start, so as time progressed the hair got longer, thus the passage of time being more obvious. He then took these 8627 photographs and put them together in a time-lapse film, condensing the year down into six minutes. (Groom, 2017)

Hsieh's work highlights how modern Western time is linked with capitalism – without it, the system that unpins our society would not work. The mechanical time that our society is based on is continuing and exact, and now rule our lives. It has pulled away from nature – unlike the sundial, the clock does not need nature to work, but rather changes gravitational momentum or electricity into the time – with no thought to what is happening outside. (Except, possibly, in day-light saving

time, where an hour removed to give more sunlight in the day, though again this is done to make better use of the sunlight during the working day.) But it wasn't until 1657 sufficient mechanical advancements happened (the theory of time being measured in seconds had been around since the 14th century) that meant the clock could have a minute hand, while before it only held an hour hand, and it was not added on mass till the 18th century. (Foskett, 2017) Time also needed a revamp after the use of trains for passage became more popular, with people travelling further distances in less time. No longer was it logical for different towns to have different times, as well as the different times causing confusion on timetables. (Buckle, 2021) In 1876, time zones became established. But, much like the clock itself, its invention ended up not being as a-political as one would first think. For example, China while spanning five geological time zones, only uses one for the whole country, Beijing time, so in the regions far away from this city the sun doesn't rise and set at the optimal time for the people living there. (Schiavenza, 2013) It is important to note that this was when the industrial revolution began to happen, and workers needed exact times to work, and their pay measured. George Woodcock (1944) in his anarchist essay *The Tyranny of the Clock* summed it up well, stating: "Now the movement of the clock sets the tempo of men's lives – they become the servant of the concept of time which they themselves have made". In this work Hsieh shows this himself, becoming part of the clock and this system, a year recorded in the time given out by a work time punch – a feeling that many people who have worked pay by the hour jobs would understand and recognise the feeling of.

With the representation of the change in time, the time punch cards are almost irrelevant, the lined up photographs doing a much better job of showing the change, and the passage of time, than numbers on a paper can. This is because it is visual, with effects like Hsieh's hair growing longer giving us something to contextualise. However, an example of showing only the dates can be found in On Kawara's work *One Million Years*.

In this piece, there are two books. Part one, *For Those Who Have Lived and Died*, covers the dates from 998,031 BC to 1969 AD, and part two, *For the Last One*, begins at 1993 AD and goes to the year 1,001,992 AD. Portions of the book have also been read out loud in different galleries, giving the dates not just form on paper, but a performative presence out loud as well. Kawara uses this work to remind the viewer of where they are in history and to give the passage of time materiality it normally does not have. Because the passage of time in the book is so long – one million years as the title suggests – it covers time long before homo sapiens were even present on the Earth. Unlike Hsieh's work above, he is trying to contextual a period of time that is too big for us to understand as humans properly – we, after all, will only live for around 72 years of them. While he has logged it and given it form, it does not manage to portray the full scope of these million years – but, one could say it was always going to be doomed, and the enormity of it is too much for us to see anything but meaningless numbers on a page. (Zwirner, 2009) After all, unlike Hsieh's work, there are no pictures he can take to help us. The years written down though, linked to something like stamps on a time punch card, can help do this though, giving our minds something familiar to put together with something too big for our minds to understand properly.

Time as Distortion

One of the common misconceptions about time is that it is absolute. This theory was made popular by Newton – earning its nickname Newtonian time. Absolute time is the theory that time exists independently of any observer, and is a constant throughout the universe – time existed before the universe began and will keep existing once it is gone. Newton described this time as "Absolute, true, and mathematical time, of itself, and from its own nature, flows equably without relation to anything external." (Rynasiewicz, 2011) However, after Einstein and his theory of relativity which was proposed in 1905, time was now understood as something that is connected to the universe and it could not be absolute. While Newtonian time is no longer accepted as how time works, it is important to note that it does behave like how we experience time. (Hawking, 2005)

The theory of relativity however tells us that time is based completely on the observer and is connected to the universe itself. For example, an object in an extreme gravitational field, or travelling at a higher velocity will experience time slower than an object standing still on Earth. It is important to note that the object will not know that they are currently experiencing time differently and still see it at the same pace. This means if you (hypothetically, of course) are travelling close to the speed of light to a distant planet and back again, by the time you return those you left on Earth will be a lot older than you – may even be long dead depending on how far you went. While these seem like theoretical ideas, with the use of an atomic clock this phenomenon has been recorded on Earth. Using a mountain and the gravitational pull of Earth they found that the atomic clock ticks slightly faster at the top of the mountain than at sea level. Of course, the difference between the two is so small no human could notice the effect of it. (Rovelli, 2018)

However, our minds can do the same thing. Everyone has heard the phrase "time flies when you're having fun" or had to sit through an experience that bores you that seems to drag on longer than you would have thought possible. This is quite simply because our bodies can sense time passing, and if we are distracted, we are not paying attention to it. (Salleh, 2017)

Douglas Gordon is an artist that plays with our perception of time. In his 1993 work *24 Hour Psycho* he takes Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) and slows it down so it projects two frames per second, dragging the duration out to 24 hours. Doing so removes the tension in the film, and causes the viewer not to focus on the frame that is about to happen, but the one that is happening now. This plays with how we experience time because we often think of it by 'remembering' and 'anticipating'. (Thoreau, 1982) Because the frames are so long, both of these become harder to do resulting in this distortion. Gordon has taken a familiar piece of media, something most people can recognise, causing this slow, distorted version of it to be even more jarring, with the expected drawn out and changed. (Ballestrasse, 2016)

Gordon's work shows not only the disruption of the mechanical clock and the manipulation of modern time but also hints at the disruption of the biological clock. All organisms have a natural timing device, keeping the circadian rhythms on time, and they are composed of proteins in nearly every tissue and organ in our body. These are all controlled by a master clock in our brain made up of around 20,000 neurons, and this is affected by the world around us, light being an important part of it. (IGMS, 2020)

In 2021, 15 volunteers descended into a cave in southwest France. After 40 days of no clocks, no daylight and no external communications they emerged again. As to be expected, these volunteers had lost their sense of time. Christian Clot, after hearing the 40 days were up said, "We just left after 40 days … For us it was a real surprise. In our heads, we had walked into the cave 30 days ago." And one member even estimated only 23 days passed. The volunteers also stopped counting 'days' but rather 'sleep cycles', and discussed how they found themselves not planning ahead, but rather how to make the most of the present moment they were living. Because humans are social

creatures, the group also began to synchronise themselves with each other, almost making their own local time zone in the cave. (Associated Press, 2021)

This was not the first time this has been done. In 1972, Michel Siffre, a speleologist (someone who studies caves) and sleep researcher, descended 100 feet into the Midnight Cave in Texas for two months. (Foer, 2008) He stated during his time in the cave that he was “beyond time.” During this time his sleep-wake cycle lengthened, making his circadian cycle was longer than 24 hours. Like those in France almost half a century later, he believed he had spent less time in the cave than he actually had. One of the interesting things about this is that neither the volunteers in France nor Siffre, realised that their sleep-wake cycle had changed – they were perceiving it to be the same length as it was before. (Inglis-Arkell, 2014)

Language also holds an important part in how we understand time, with strong evidence showing how we speak affects and shapes our cognitive patterns. Most languages in the world explain time like English – the past is behind us, and the future is in front. For example, in English, we would say “we are coming to the end of the year”, as in the end of the year is in front and coming towards us. Language only holds a metaphorical model of time yet it has been consistent in the metaphors we use to describe it, however, it has been noted that the only language to not follow this pattern is the Amerindian language of Aymara, spoken in the Andean highlands. (They are, however, not the only language that plays with our English understanding of our metaphor for time, the western African language of Hausa also does this, with behind (*baya*) used for events closer to the observer and in front of (*gaba*) behind used for those further away. This means they have translations that seem completely strange in English, such as “Tuesday is before Monday”, meaning from the observer's point of view, Tuesday is closer than Monday.) Aymara, however, is completely different, with *nayra*, used to mean the past, is also used to mean in front of, and *qhipa*, used to mean the future, also means behind. So they would say *nayra pacha* to mean past time, but it directly translates to front time, and *qhipa pacha* to mean future time, but directly translates to back time. This was not only used in language but collaborated by the hand gestures they used, motioning in

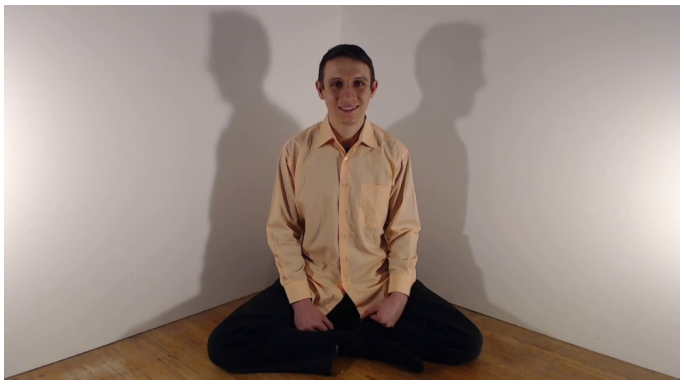
front of them to show past generations and pointing behind them to show their children's. To most of the world, this way of speaking about time is completely alien and almost defies understanding. However, interpretations of the language show that there may be a logical explanation for it: the past is in front of us because the past is known. *Nayra* also means 'eyes' – this is not unusual in language, English having its own version in our use of 'face' – and because they can only see the past and the present, it is the only thing in front of us. (Núñeza, Sweetser, 2006) Marta Hardman, an anthropologist who studied the Aymara for almost fifty years, decided that this way of thinking maybe more correct, saying that in English we are encouraged to forget the past, stating "We pretend it's not there, yet we're lugging it with us as we go." (Spinney, 2005)

Time as Now

Time being relative also brings forth questions of now – and whether it exists at all. If people experience it differently, how can we decide what is the 'now' and what is the then, or the future? For example, if we were standing on Earth looking at a telescope at Proxima B (the closest planet to Earth which could be habitable) anything we would see through it would be happening four years in the past to the object on the planet. To say it was happening now would be both correct and incorrect, depending on which planet you were on. Because light only travels at 299,792,458 m/s, this also happens in a small bubble around each person and object on Earth. If you watching someone do something across the room, there is a slight delay between when the person does the action and the image reaches your eyes and your brain processes the information. Of course, in our everyday life, this lag is so minuscule, it is unnoticeable, but it does make the 'now' something completely personal to each person and object in the universe. (Rovelli, 2018) One of the most interesting things about the fact that light takes so long to travel is the fact that pointed in any direction a strong enough telescope can record the start of the universe because it happened so far away – it is both correct and incorrect to say the universe is beginning now. (Hawking, 2005) As Rovelli (2018) puts it in The Order of Time "There is not one single time; there is a vast multitude of them."

The now is also almost impossible to pin down. The moment you capture the 'now' it is already gone into the unreachable past. An artist who tries to capture this is Matt Molloy (though like any attempt to capture the present, it falls short). Using hundred of stacked images, all taken of the same landscape at different times he forms

a single image that brings to mind impressionist paintings. (Molloy, 2015) He's not the first artist to study time in this way, most famously Claude Monet in his work *Haystacks*, painted the same image at different times of the year, logging the changes that take place on a site during different times. Molloy's work is a more modernised version. His work blurs together the 'now', stretching it out over a long period, showing how meaningless the concept can be, as well as showing the ever-changing state of the world around us. Another important thing Molloy's work shows is the context of the photograph. The photograph is always a snapshot of the past, of things that were once there, and once someone is looking at it is viewed in the 'now'. Geoffrey Batchen (2010) in his essay *Life and Death* comments on this, saying "To look at a photograph is therefore to experience a temporal movement back and forth between past and present*;* it is to witness the passing of time in general." Molloy's work still does this – these are photographs already taken and stacked up, not being continuously, and in live time (which, as I have already explained the personal effect of 'now' is not physically possible) it still only shows the past, but a drawn-out version. But Molloy's work is not just one snapshot of the now, but rather hundreds of nows drawn together as one, showing time passing. In a way, Molloy's work adheres to this statement. It has drawn together, in a small window, the past, present, and future of a field. However, Molloy's work goes against what Dogen Zenji (1240) speaks of in his essay *Uji (Existence-Time)* which explores the 'now'. He explains that existence-time passes only in moments – from yesterday it passes, through moments, to today, and today to tomorrow will do the same. He states "Passage through separate moments is a virtue of Time, moments of the past and present are neither piled up on top of another nor lined up in a row." This explores how we see time as a whole construct, and Molloy's photographs are showing time stacked on top of each other, like every moment is happening at once.



Another artist which also looks at present time is Benjamin Bennett. He uploaded his first piece *Sitting and Smiling* on July 28, 2014. By 2019 he had reached 300 of these videos which

feature him sitting in front of a camera and smiling for different durations of time. Unlike Hsieh's work, these pieces take place in a domestic setting – his own house. Because these videos are also live-streamed there is an air of unpredictability about them, as well as a lack of second chances. Bennett has to stay sitting in front of the camera and smile for the period of time he decided on, including on his 52nd livestream where he urinated on himself. He does not break composure, and the puddle seeps out and evaporates from under him. His work focuses on the attention of the present, his cross-legged stance bringing to mind meditation and mindfulness.

The viewer of the video is asked to watch someone just sitting and smiling for hours – which quickly becomes clear is nearly an unwatchable task. Time stretches on, highlighting the fact that experiencing time while doing 'nothing' is near impossible, and questions what it actually is to live in the now. (Kennett, 2015)

Just like with Molloy's work above, capturing the present is not actually achieved in this piece. Even though he live streams these performances, the delay is still there – and maybe even more obvious, for example, the internet speed in someone's house causing a visible lag on the screen.

Time as Only Now

With the ‘now’ established, there comes the question of whether anything else truly exists. This line of thinking is called Presentism and was described by Theodore Sider, an American philosopher. “Presentism is the doctrine that only the present is real. … A presentist thinks that everything is present; more generally, that, necessarily, it is always true that everything is (then) present.” It is the opposite of eternalism, which claims the past and future exist as well. For example, an eternalist will believe dinosaurs and future space colonises exist as well, while a presentist will disagree. Another theory (though not supported by that many philosophers) is that of the growing block theory, which is where the past and present exist, but the future does not yet. While presentism may sound odd, it does make the claim of taking a “common sense” view on time. We can only be sure of what is in front of us. (Ingram, Tallant, 2018) The past is told through memories, which are faulty, and change over time or with different information. (Nash, 2018) The future, which we have not experienced, is also unknown to us, and there is debate about whether the future is already set in stone, or if we can change it.

One of the earliest recorded writings about presentism comes from St Augustine of Hippo’s *Confessions* in chapter eleven. The books were written in Latin between 397 and 400 AD. Referencing the Book of Genesis, he questions the nature of time. He writes “For the past has no existence and the future is not yet” which is a cornerstone of the presentism philosophy. He also asks questions about the first line of the Bible, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” paying particular attention to the “in the beginning” part. The line shows that time began at a certain point – which is backed up by science, once Einstein’s theory of relativity showed that time was linked to the universe – and that God made time, and that He existed before it. St Augustine makes it clear in his writings that he cannot presume to know all that God is, nor understand how time flows – if it does, in fact, flow – for Him. He writes “but that in the Eternal nothing passeth but the whole is present; whereas no time is all at once present: and that all time is past, is driven on by

time to come, and all to come followeth upon the past." When put together with his earlier ideas of presentism, this ends up making an interesting point. For humans, our present is just one moment, and this is the only thing that exists for us, but for God, all moments are present, meaning all time – and what extends before and after it – exists for Him.

However, St Augustine does acknowledge that while the past and future may not exist as physical objects, a version of them does exist in our minds. He writes "is in time past, which now is not: but now when I recall its image, and tell of it, I behold it in the present, because it is still in my memory" and "Therefore they are not future but present to those who now see that, from which the future, being foreconceived in the mind, is foretold." The Bible also holds promises of the future in it. The Old Testament tells of the prophetical future of Jesus coming, and the New Testament promises the second coming. Because, as St. Augustine already showed, the now to God is not the same as for us, the future already exists in a form for Him, and therefore, the visions of the future are true and already exist, even if they don't yet for us.

Presentism as a theory has lots of faults with it. The phrase "only the present exists" can be taken in many different ways. For example, you can take it as "only present things exist now", which is unequivocally true to the point where it doesn't need mentioning. Or, you could take it as "only present things have existed, exist now, or will exist". This can be deemed false because of counterexamples. For example, a dead person no longer exists, but they did once exist and we can see proof of this existence around us, which run counter to this phrase. The third way of taking it is "only present things exist, unconditionally", which if you believe the second statement to be false, this one is also seen as false. Another problem with presentism is it does not fit into how we see passing time. While how we describe time is only metaphors, we do use these to base our understanding of the concept on it. We see the future coming towards us – or, alternatively, we can also see us going towards the future – and past events behind us travelling further away from us – or we are travelling further from them. With presentism, with only the present existing, there is no

future to come towards us, nor no past to be moving away from us. You could say that the passage of time is incompatible with the theory. (Ingram, Tallant, 2018)

Conclusion

This essay has given a brief overview of time. It has explored how our understanding of it has changed from something fixed and external in Newton's time to a force that is connected and vital to the universe in Einstein's. With this discovery, time becomes something personal, as highlighted by the cave experiments, where sunlight is taken away and humans are left to run on their biological time. It becomes clear that the internal clock runs slower than the twenty-four hour day, stretching the days out, but, as humans, we cannot perceive that change. This links to the cultural aspect of time, with capitalism and the industrial revolution turning it into something we can measure exactly for payment and production values, where the clock becomes a prison to the workers. The metaphors we use to describe it also affects our whole world view, the Aymara speakers of the Andes, where their metaphors for it are backwards of those of every other language currently found and studied, which rejects the western capitalism time. Time zones are also explored, showing how time can be wielded in politics. It has also explored the view of presentism, and what part of time truly exists to us, as well as questioning the before and after of time (which has been scientifically shown to have a beginning and an end) and how this relates to God as the Creator.

It then considers the concepts of time and how they all link into the concept of the 'now', and how, rather than being something absolute, it becomes completely personal to every single object in the universe. This elusive 'now' is impossible to capture and pin down, arriving and leaving too quickly for us to truly grasp, and questions how anyone could live in the now, while at the same time acknowledging that the 'now' is all we can live in, without faulty memories distorting the past and an unknown future that can only be anticipated in our minds.

Because time is such a complex and varying concept, there is no conclusive answer to what time is, with it existing differently for various people. Looking at time, I have found it interesting how time can be so easily distorted for us, as well as how much of our understanding of it is not based on scientific fact, but the culture we live in.

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Image References

Image one: Hsieh, T (1980-1981) *One Year Performance 1980-1981* [Time cards, time clock, 16mm film (colour, silent)] Available at: http://ameliagroom.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/time-clock.jpg Last Accessed 08/12/2021

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Image four: Gordon, D (1993) *24 Hour Psycho* Available at: https://media.wsimag.com/attachments/5b61a9ca488e143998c896b278383f77631f3b4f/store/fill/324/243/4e1abe8ff8f844ee77b2c3f0e02a4f01cee20c34e23b9621b62287445c71/Douglas-Gordon-Courtesy-of-Gagosian.jpg Last Accessed 08/12/2021

Image five Molloy, M (2013) *Sunset Spectrum* [Photograph] Available at: https://www.thisiscolossal.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/molloy-1.jpg Last Accessed 08/12/2021

Image six: Bennett, B (2019) *Sitting and Smiling* [Video camera] Available at: https://i.ytimg.com/vi/tuSwRxFbg6k/maxresdefault.jpg Last Accessed 08/12/2021