

Opening Unknown Time Fall 2012

Orientation and Guidance for Session 3

First, my sincere apologies: I forgot to hit the record button on my recorder, and as a result there is no recording for the Week 2 phone call.

In lieu of a recording, here is a brief summary of what we discussed, based on notes I made immediately afterwards:

- I once again encouraged everyone to make an ongoing inquiry into time part of his or her daily activity. The idea is simple: we want to get familiar with time, to make it a theme as we go about our day. You don't have to do this every waking minute, just whenever it occurs to you. I suggested a couple of analogies: the way a basketball coach might tell a young player to carry a basketball wherever he or she goes, and the way people who want to train in lucid dreaming are told to ask again and again during their activities, "Is this a dream?" We are looking to make a revolutionary shift in our understanding of time—not just on the level of theory, but as we experience it. So we need to make the question of time a living reality in our lives.

- There is a second step to this ongoing inquiry: sharing the results through discussions on the website. As I wrote in the Course Introduction, we want to develop a community of inquiry. That's how revolutions happen!

- Now, what is it that is so radical about the approach we are taking? For an answer, we looked again at the first sentence of Chapter 9: the dynamic of time transmits experience as unfolding along a continuum from past to present to future. On the surface this doesn't sound like anything new. But the claim being made is that the past-present-future structure (let's abbreviate that to "ppf structure") is a product of time's dynamic. Past, present, and future are not the truth of time. They are just a particular way that time's dynamic manifests. If we can see experience in this way, we will be well on the way to TSK's promise of enacting "a new vision of reality."

- Understood in this way, each new 'moment' of experience already comes complete with its own ppf structure. I asked you to consider the second diagram on p. 74 of DTS in this light. Here it is (sorry for the low resolution):

On the face of it, this structure makes it look as though moment T2 is the future of moment T1, and that is in fact our usual understanding. But in the very different vision we're exploring, the future of T1 may have nothing to do with T2 (provided you understand T2 to be its own 'present' moment).

This is easy to see if we just look at how experience unfolds. One moment I'm eating a forkful of omelet, and the next moment I'm thinking about the upcoming election. The ppf structure of the 'forkful' moment has nothing to do with the ppf structure of the 'election' moment. If you look from outside (or reflect back on the temporal sequence later); in other words, if you measure time on a clock, you might say that the 'forkful' moment happened at 0:00:52 and the 'election' moment happened at 0:00:53. But that has nothing to do with the ppf structure of each moment. In terms of experience, the moments are radically separate.

- The discussion at this point turned to an aside: the way time is treated in the movie (and book) *Cloud Atlas*. Bruce mentioned he had seen it last night, and as it happened, I had seen it last night as well. I recommend the book in particular as a novel deeply concerned with time.

[As an aside, Bruce quoted one passage from the novel; I will quote another, found at more or less the same point in the book (page 393): “One model of time: an infinite matryoshka doll of painted moments, each ‘shell’ (the present) encased inside a nest of ‘shells’ (previous presents) I call the actual past but which we perceive as the virtual past. The doll of ‘now’ likewise encases a nest of presents yet to be, which I call the actual future but which we perceive as the virtual future.”) Here’s another line, from p. 430: “She grasps for the ends of this elastic moment, but it disappears into the past and the future.”

A caveat: we are not particularly interested in constructing new models of time. But we are interested in exploring the model we usually use and asking how well it fits our ordinary experience. DTS suggests it fits very poorly, and it invites us to explore this for ourselves.

- If time keeps transmitting a ppf structure to our experience, so that past, present, and future are an inseparable whole, how do we make sense of the flow of linear time? After all, clocks and calendars, which separate past from present and present from future, do work; they perform a function. Both make sense because they are consistent with certain undeniable physical facts: the path the earth takes around the sun and the way the earth turns on its axis. All that is what we usually call ‘objective’ time, and it works very well. But that’s the point: linear time is a tool for organizing and explaining our experience. It’s a way of taming time, or putting it to use, without in any way claiming to make sense of time. It’s like driving a car without knowing how the engine works, or relying on awareness without in any way understanding what awareness is.

- Then what about ‘subjective’ time. Is that what DTS is pointing toward? Not really. Subjective time is the opposite of objective time, but both of them depend on accepting the linear ppf structure as the truth about time. To use an image Michael offered during our session, we just naturally think of time as being like a house: you walk through the front door, you walk through the house, and you walk out the back door. But time may be ‘structured’ very differently; in fact, it may not have a structure at all. Bruce suggested that time may be more like a mesh, which I understand to mean that it interlocks in complex ways. *Cloud Atlas* offers a model along those lines, for those who would like to pursue it.

- Well then, what is the truth about time? We can’t say too much about that yet, but we can at least focus in on the dynamic through which one ppf structure gives way to another. It’s incredibly tempting to say that this ‘giving way’ dynamic is itself linear in structure: one moment follows the next: this one, then the next one. But that approach tries to use the ppf structure at one level to explain the ppf structures at another level. It amounts to saying that one ppf structure (the one that accompanies or shapes each ‘moment’ of experience) owes its continuity with other ppf structures (for instance, the continuity of being always ‘my’ experience, to another ppf structure. But then, where does that ‘deeper ppf structure come from? Does it make sense to say there are two ‘levels’ of time? It’s a problem, isn’t it? Okay, that’s the end of the summary of our session today. If anyone would like to add to it, please do so.

Now, a bit of review and a look ahead.

We are going to move ahead to the second chapter. What did we learn from the first chapter? One key point is that we don't really experience time at all, or at least not in the way we think we do. We never experience the past, because it's gone, and we never experience the future, because it hasn't arrived. And if the reply is that we experience the present, that turns out to be a very shaky claim, for the reasons set out in the text: the present takes its form/content from the unknown past and its momentum from the unknown future. If past and future can't be experienced, the whole ppf structure collapses.

On the other hand, the very possibility of having an experience, the very fact that you are reading these words, implicates time. But whatever it means to say that, it does not seem to point toward the ppf structure as being real. Time in experience suggests something very different, not shaped by a linear sequence. That's what's implied by the statement on the bottom of page 77 that the future, far from being substantially real, is "a way of naming a particular aspect of the temporal dynamic."

Now, the reading for last week presents another possibility, one we didn't have a chance to discuss. Take a look at the last paragraph on p. 75, continuing over to page 76:

Time is always in motion, . . . it both comes and goes To be in the present is to be caught up in this steady flow—this presenting.

That dynamic, that steady presenting, seems closer to the truth of time than the ppf structure that is presented or 'transmitted'. And that notion is a good point of departure for the next chapter.

One way to engage this dynamic while still acknowledging the ppf structure is the notion of 'lineages' of time. To speak of lineage (p. 80) acknowledges the linear ppf structure, but at the same time it allows for different lineages, perhaps evolving side by side. It is like looking at a complex family tree. On the surface, this image is too static, but reality of a family tree is one of many acts of intercourse, many sequences of birth and aging; in other words, the living reality of being human, renewed again and again. Does that take us closer to the "steady flow" of time? The notion of lineage may also give us a better model for understanding 'subjective time', which I slid past perhaps too quickly in the phone call. We'll see next time.

The basic practice we've embarked on by now should be clear. Be aware of time as an experienced dimension in your life. You are not trying to take hold of some abstraction, but to see how the ways we make sense of our experience implicate the ppf structure and—perhaps—a dynamic more fundamental than that structure. Michael's suggestion that our intimate relations with others may be away of engaging time at a deeper level may help some of you in your explorations. I have already referred to exercises 18 and 19 in the first TSK book: these offer us our basic guidance in how to investigate. If you can take the time to explore these exercises in a meditative way, that's great. But it's also fine to explore as you go about your life. Right now, are you reaching out in terms of a future? Are you making sense in terms of a

past?

Whatever answer you give, the content of the answer can't be real answer, because there is no taking hold of it. In the 'next' moment, time and its ppf structure is different. How truly remarkable!