

THE PHILOSOPHER'S STONE

The Newsletter of the Philosophical Discussion Group

www.thales1.armstrong.edu/pdg/

Please join us for our discussion on Time (or anything else for that matter). We will meet in Gamble Hall, room 213 on Monday, April 19th at 6:30 pm.

Tangible Consequences of an Intangible Time

by Mary Culp

“Ah, now! That odd time—the oddest time of all times; the time it always is...by the time we’ve reached the “w” of “now” the “n” is ancient history.”
—Michael Frayn

In a culture dependent on physical evidence for validation of anything as “real”, it seems absurd that an invisible force such as time can have such a grip on our everyday lives. Surely, there are physical phenomena such as the changing seasons and moon phases that support the notion of time, yet time itself is a purely abstract concept. The hold that time has on society is illustrated in such activities that are so routine, they often go unquestioned. The average person does not know all of the calculations involved in upholding *the time*, or that most years the ball in New York’s Times Square is hastened up to a thousandth of a second (because *every* second counts). However, everyone remembers to “fall back or spring forward” in a cultural attempt to gain time. The very notion that time is not in sync with nature, at least not without some adjustment,

should suggest the fallibility of such a mechanism.

The phrase “time is money” can be helpful in realizing the drive in our culture that fuels obsession over time. The increasing pace of technological and scientific advances, as well as advancement in other professions, is aimed in many respects to “save time”, and of course, make money. Ironically however, developing the relentless “updates” significantly increases weekly work-hours, in effect, dwindling the time and energy one has to devote to mental and physical well being. Stress levels are steadily rising, road-rage has become a relatively normal occurrence, and yet it seems few have explored the possibility of freeing ourselves from the enslavement of *time*, at least not as a “real” option.

All too often, the persistence of deadlines and personal agendas make it a luxury to do something for oneself. It’s no wonder “self-improvement-in-a-weekend” books are constantly being stocked in the bookstores. Few have the leisure to search for “real” insight and knowledge, because they’re constantly battling the invisible machine of *time*.

Many cultures worldwide, such as the primitive Australian Aborigines, have no definite distinction between *the time* and *the action*. In this respect, with

every action the human being is viewed as the manifestation of time. This approach humanizes the unseen flow between past, present, and future. Alternatively, our society encourages a separation between man and time, organizing time through impersonal numbers. With clocks in every public place, and watches on most left wrists, it is clear that in our culture, time is the manager of man.

“Our conception of time...is one of the peculiar characteristics of the modern world.”

—G.J. Withrow

The Technological Society’s Modification of Time

by Jacques Ellul

That man until recently got along well enough without measuring time precisely is something we never even think about, and that we do not think about it shows to what degree we have been affected by technique. What means there were in the past for measuring time belonged to the rich and, until the fourteenth century, exerted no influence on real time or on life. Until then, there were mechanical *horologia* which did not so much mark the hour as indicate it very

approximately by bells or chimes. The clocktower, with its public clock, made its appearance toward the end of that century. Until then, time had been measured by life's needs and events. At most, life had been regulated since the fifth century by church bells; but this regulation really followed a psychological and biological tempo. The time man guided himself by corresponded to nature's time; it was material and concrete. It became abstract (probably toward the end of the fourteenth century) when it was divided into hours, minutes, and seconds. Little by little this mechanical kind of time, with its knife-edge divisions, penetrated, along with machinery, into human life. The first private clocks appeared in the sixteenth century. Thenceforward, time was an abstract measure separated from the traditional rhythms of life and nature. It became mere quantity. But since life is inseparable from time, life too was forced to submit to the new guiding principle. From then on, life itself was measured by the machine; its organic functions obeyed the mechanical. Eating, working, and sleeping were at the beck and call of machinery. Time, which had been the measure of organic sequences, was broken and dissociated. Human life ceased to be an ensemble, a whole, and became a disconnected set of activities having no other bond than the fact that they were performed by the same individual.* Mechanical abstraction and rigidity permeated the whole structure of being. "Abstract time became a new milieu, a new framework of existence." Today the human being is dissociated from the essence of life; instead of living time, he is split up and parceled out by it. Lewis Mumford is right in calling the clock the most important

machine of our culture. And he is right too in asserting that the clock has made modern progress and efficiency possible through its rapidity of action and the coordination it effects in man's daily activities. All organization of work and study of motion is based on the clock.

*Enrico Castelli's study *Le Temps harcelant* extends our observations into the realm of the psychological. He shows how the man of the technical world lives without past or future and how the loss of the sense of duration deprives law and language of their meaning. According to Castelli, modern man lives in a universe in which technique has divested language of its meaning and value. If this formula seems exaggerated, I would direct you to Castelli's book, to see its essential truth.

The book stresses the fact that technique, as a result of the perfection of means which it has placed at the disposal of modern man, has effectively suppressed the respite of time indispensable to the rhythm of life; between desire and the satisfaction of desire there is no longer the duration which is necessary for real choice and examination. There is no longer respite for reflection or choosing or adapting oneself, or for acting or wishing or pulling oneself together. The rule of life is: No sooner said than done. Life has become a racecourse composed of instantaneous variations of the universe, a succession of objective events which drag us along and lead us astray without anywhere affording us the possibility of standing apart, taking stock, and ceasing to act.

This previous passage was taken from Jacques Ellul's *The Technological Society* (1964) which will be one of the required texts in PHIL3200: "Technology, Society & Human Values" offered this Fall at 1:30 - 2:45 M W by Dr. Nordenhaug.

If you have any questions, criticisms, or comments, please contact either Chris Dunn or Dr. Nordenhaug. Anyone interested in writing a brief article for *The Philosopher's Stone*, please contact either of us (it doesn't have to be good, however it does have to be thoughtful).

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