

DOES TIME MOVE? DOGEN AND THE ART OF UNDERSTANDING THE MOMENT

In the Western world, at least since the Renaissance, the prevailing view about time has been that it not only moves but moves forward, linearly, in one direction from a hypothesized beginning, such as the Big Bang, to an undetermined end, possibly apocalyptic. And while it is true that the changes we observe in the world, including our own aging, seem to be happening in one direction (nobody is getting younger), it is also true that our tendency to interpret events as progression or as a linear process may not always be caused by the phenomena we are observing but rather by a perceptual bias ingrained in our own directional habit of reading, writing, and analytical thinking.¹

Does time move forward? Does it move at all? Is time a changing or moving characteristic of space and matter? From the scientific point of view, things are said to move in time or as time passes. Matter evolves, expands, changes, appears and disappears over millenia. The accepted view is that time started with a cosmic explosion and exists because space and matter exist. Space and matter create the linearity of time, testify to the fact that time had a beginning and has a probable end. Under certain conditions time may slow down, and, theoretically, warp holes may be possible, through which future astronauts could short-circuit to distant galaxies at a fraction of conventional time. Still, the underlying assumption in all of this is that time moves forward, or rather that we move forward in time, no matter how fast or slowly.

Recent philosophical debate has centered over what are termed A-time and B-time theories, which are sometimes referred to as the tensed theory and the tenseless theory.² The A-time hypothesis holds that consciousness is critical to the meaning of time. In other words, we use tenses because they reflect our perspective about present, past and future. Our presence is essential in order to understand what time it is and when things occur in relation to what time it is. One implication of this hypothesis is that, according to Brian Leftow, future events are in no way actual as long as they are still future. Their becoming present changes their ontological status, clothing them in actuality that they had lacked while in the future.³ Hence, time's passage — i.e., the becoming actual of non-actual future events — is a genuine feature of objective reality.

The B theory, on the other hand, holds that future events are already fully real. Their becoming present does not alter their ontological status. Hence, time's passage in this view is not a feature of objective reality at all because future events, upon arriving at the present, do not take on an actuality which they did not already have in the future.⁴ What passage of time amounts to is, instead, the response and interpreting of human perception. And so, according to this view, when we say "time passes," all we really mean is that our perceptions alter. By implication, all things, all events in time, are equally, tenselessly actual. This does not mean, however, that all events are simultaneous. I am not young and old at the same time. B-time theorists do not claim that the universe exists "all at once," but simply that all events are co-actual.⁵

In fact, A-time and B-time theorists use different language to describe what they see as their distinct points of view about time. For the former, there is an objectively real passage from future to present time, and from present to past. The B theorists, on the other hand, steer clear of such expressions as past, present and future, and prefer to use "earlier than," "simultaneous with," and "later than" to describe and compare positions in time. For them, tenseness is not mind-independent but instead is a product of the mind, not of time itself. B theorists, in other words, see everything as already laid down. Relations between events are always true, and nothing in the series from earlier to later can change.⁶

Both these theories about time that we have been discussing are premised on time's linearity, the fact that it can be measured, that it moves — or is laid out like a series — from one direction to the opposite. While it is true that in the B theory everything is already laid out and is co-actual, there is, nevertheless, a before and after on the time line. Linearity, if not movement along the yardstick of temporal measurement, is thus called for even under the B hypothesis.

In contrast to these theories, another approach to the subject of time — one not based on linearity — was expounded long ago by the 13th-century Zen Buddhist monk, Dogen, the founder of the Soto school of Zen Buddhism in Japan.

Dogen writes, "Time is not separate from you, and as you are present, time does not go away."⁷ The first thing, therefore, to note about Dogen's teaching is that it is oriented around human consciousness, and in this respect has affinities with the A theory of time. Time implies awareness of the fact that I, the speaker, exist in temporality and specifically in the present time. This point is alluded to by A-time theorist John Lucas, who contends, "It would be

unintelligible for me to offer a frame of temporal reference within which I could not refer to the date at which I was then speaking. It is part of the concept of time that it is connected to us. . . . The essential egocentricity of time is reflected in the ineliminability of tenses.”⁸

But for Dogen, time not only is intimately connected to us. It, moreover, neither comes nor goes away. “You may suppose that time is only passing away, and not understand that time never arrives,” he writes.⁹ “As time is not marked by coming and going, yesterday and today are both in the moment.”¹⁰

So now we proceed a step further in his thinking, and this also accords with A-time theory. There is no past or future, no ontological substratum out of which the past and future can be said to exist, except insofar as they are found in the present moment, whose ontological base lacks connection with anything outside of itself. Dogen describes this moment as “not coming or going anywhere and nothing is left out of it.”¹¹ The present moment is never “slipping away.” The immediate presencing of right-now [*nikon*] is cut off from life and death, before and after. He describes *nikon* as “an eternity and totality complete in and of itself as a holistic and dynamic situational context.”¹² Though complete in itself, the moment — paradoxically — is characterized as well by impermanence [*mujo*]. While on the one hand every moment is a purposeless and selfless totality, encompassing before and after, past and future, life and death, “it is at the same time cut off from before and after, life and death in that it is absolutely without substratum.”¹³ That is, there is no enduring self or enduring phenomena. It is not that existence changes or the self changes over time. Rather, the self and phenomena are aspects of impermanence, and impermanence has no measure because it is not relative to anything else which is not impermanent.

While it is true that Dogen uses the phrase “every moment” — suggesting a plethora of moments through which we live our lives, it is clear that in his thinking there is no “through which,” no enduring self that holds these discrete moments together. In his philosophy, there is no sequentiality, no substratum that ties the moments together. Quite the contrary, the moment gives definition to the self, to the entities. If there is any foundation for time at all, any ontological base, it is the present moment. But this presencing is characterized by impermanence, and as such it cannot be measured because there is nothing to compare it to. Permanence does not exist.

From what Dogen says, we can see that both his perspective on time and the A theory have points of agreement. Both emphasize the centrality of the present and deny the existence of past and future as separate entities. Still, there are some crucial differences. While the A theory denies the ontological

existence of future and past, it nevertheless holds to a passage of time. Leftow describes time's passage, under A theory, as a genuine feature of objective reality, the becoming actual of non-actual future events.¹⁴ Clifford Williams describes the passage as a shift of presentness from event to event.¹⁵ These views, as I see it, necessitate the idea of a process, a flow or directional current, the moving into and out of reality of a series of events along a time line, which in turn provides a source for measurement and quantification. By contrast, Dogen is not talking about a linear concept of time at all but about the totality of the moment complete in itself and cut off from cause and effect, yesterday and tomorrow. There is no yardstick by which to measure such moments, only our own internal estimate.

The best way to understand this notion of the moment, it seems to me, is to liken it to one aspect of B theory; namely, the important role this latter theory attaches to human perception in giving us the sense of time. Nothing passes in fact. We create time. We fabricate what appear to be separate realms of past and future. Moments appear to move, to fly by, but it is only in fact our minds that create this illusion.

And yet, it may be argued, the content of our shifting attention, the content of this present now, does keep changing. Things and people move, come and go, change position. Surely this is not the result of our own perceptual bias? Surely we are not fabricating what we see?

The difficulty here lies in trying to distinguish between what we actually see and the mental act of interpreting the content of what we see.¹⁶ Movement is not necessarily out there in front of us. And what appears to be movement to some may not necessarily be interpreted by others as such or as signifying passing time. The phenomena of passage and change may depend, to an extent, on language. One language or interpretation may describe movement as an action, another may see it as an attribute, overall condition, or fixed quality that doesn't imply a change of presentness at all. Birds flying, waves rolling, a rainy day, the fact that the sun rises or that the light goes out — all this may or may not imply a characteristic rather than a change, or a static or momentary quality rather than a transition from one moment to the next. In fact in this context, the notion of a multiplicity of moments may be an illusion.

Just how arbitrary our understanding of momentness may be is brought out in Basho's famous poem where the state or condition of being now suddenly happens — not that moments change or that time moves but rather that the observer is brought into the present; time is created by the spectator being there as the frog jumps into the pond.

Old pond.
Frog jump in
Water sound.

Taken from an anthology, this translation of the poem — presumably closer to the Chinese — renders the suggested action “a frog jumps in” as an attribute instead — “frog jump in water sound.” Whichever way is correct, the meaning of the poem centers on a personal awakening, a presencing that depends on a witness observing what is before him, on his being there and being now.¹⁷ And yet, paradoxically, the fact of the key role of the self and of the self’s perceptions in this minimal experience given in the poem is not intended to imply subjectivity. For Basho, being in that moment creates its own ontology. Existence happens, is born, and likewise the moment occurs and perception occurs. Such a viewpoint may seem to entail an extreme form of idealism that leaves no distinction between perception and hallucination or between factual recording and poetic imagination. Dogen would certainly argue against the blurring of such distinctions and claim that the notion of time elicited in this poem was not subjective at all in the sense of being fabricated by the imagination.

In Dogen’s and Basho’s defense, we must remind ourselves of the recognition even in current philosophy of time’s fickle nature. The sense of change and momentness by which we characterize temporality are intimately related to consciousness, at least under the A theory of time. The clock provides us with numbers to measure duration, but what good are these numbers in helping me decide how long or short an event, such as my lifetime, is? How long is three hours? We can substitute other numbers — minutes and seconds — for hours, but that only changes the wording of the question. Or we can make comparisons: Three hours corresponds to a portion of the sun’s movement. But that still leaves the question unanswered. Given a different perspective and a different perception, what we consider three hours, or a lifetime, could conceivably be reduced to an instant, stored like a computer chip the size of a molecule.

Not surprisingly, Dogen attaches no length of time to his concept of moment other than to characterize it as impermanent. And of course, even in our use of the term, *moment* has no fixed length. It is even misleading to think of it as having multiplicity. How can we count moments? Where do we find their fixed boundaries? They are not substances. It would be like counting thoughts. When does one thought end and another begin?

The same can be said for the categories future, present and past. Looking out into the empirical world, where do we locate their boundaries? In fact, such boundaries don’t exist except in our minds.

Life Energies, Forces and the Shaping of Life: Vital,
Existential

Book I

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