

Joining the dots.

by Kaz

What is time? According to the Oxford English Dictionary time is:

1 the continuing progress of existence and events in the past, present and future. **2** a period of time. **3** a point of time measured in hours and minutes. **4** an instance of something happening or being done.

The first is the notion of linear time with a timeline and 'an arrow' moving along it in one direction. The second refers to a segment of time from linear time and the third is the 'clock time', an arbitrary convention of measuring 'time'. The fourth is where it is a point, which may or may not be located on a timeline as we shall see. Since our concern is the nature of time, we will disregard the third definition here.

The first definition refers to our experience of time as having past, present and future arranged on a timeline allowing us to have a sense of living over a period of time. This, according to Lacan, gives us a sense of the self, derived from the fact that language has a past and future as well as a present. Linear time is essential for the establishment of the self which enables us to make sense of the world we live in through subject-object relationship.

However, it might be argued that we actually experience time as being more segmented, as in the second definition, with each segment arranged on a timeline in a non-sequential manner where the past, present and future do not necessarily follow each other in that order. This is characteristic of our everyday mental experience of time, as we go about our daily lives, busily moving between the present, the past and the future while physically existing in the present moment.

Reality is constructed in our mind through 'objectifying' our experience as a way of understanding the world. Therefore, an event that is occurring in physical space is understood through the brain processing the stimulus received by the sense organs and constructing the experience as 'a reality'. In a similar manner, the brain can also (re-)construct reality through drawing on memories of events from the past (though this reconstruction will often differ slightly each time it is replayed). In this way, we can construct another type of reality which is virtual in the sense that it is not experienced in physical space at the moment it is experienced. Similarly, we are also capable of projecting 'the self' into the future to experience an event which may or may not happen, though this is necessarily based on what has been experienced directly or indirectly in the past (through media such as stories told by others, books, films and TV programmes).

An example of this is when one is on a frequently taken journey, memories from past journeys on the route may be remembered and relived, or the same journey may be envisaged as taking place at some point in the future. In other words,

segments from the past or future may be placed on the present position of the timeline to be experienced as 'a reality' in a virtual manner mixed with the present physical reality.

What about the fourth definition: 'an instance of something happening or being done'? This means it is at the point of the arrow on the timeline discussed above. It is the present moment or the 'now'.

This 'now' may exist as a point on a timeline, as in the second definition. Could this 'now' exist without being on a timeline so that the 'time is now' where there is only a point and no timeline?

Sublime experience is commonly described as a state where the intellectual mind is overwhelmed or disengaged when faced with 'something' incomprehensible and a feeling of oneness and timelessness is experienced. The only 'time in existence' is the 'now' with past and future collapsing into this single present moment. In this case, even for a split moment, there is no timeline but a single moment.

A theory of non-linear time has been proposed by Julian Barbour, a British physicist. His book, *End of Time* (1999), argues that all the 'nows' (which is the equivalent of points in our example above) coexist in an instant and that it is our mind that orders them in such a way that time is perceived as a flow with an arrow. In this case, though time is a point, it is a point with infinite 'nows'. An imaginary timeline is then constructed by the mind to separate and organise the 'nows' contained within a single point into a linear fashion.

To sum up, I would like to propose that time may not be linear composed of past, present and future, but that it may be a 'dot-like' infinite single present moment, a little like a temporal equivalent of a tardis*. This is, in fact, more like a starting point rather than a conclusion but since the number of pages in a journal is finite, I will finish at this starting point.

*A type of time machine used by a time lord, 'the Doctor', in the popular British television series, *Doctor Who*. Its exterior shape is that of a traditional British police box which is similar in size to a telephone box but inside is considerably larger.