

Does Time Really Exist?

The recognition of our true nature is just the beginning of the spiritual path. Stabilisation and establishment in that understanding requires a deeper investigation to uncover the hidden beliefs which provide support for the residues of the sense of separation. One such belief is the belief that time has some kind of absolute existence, as a fundamental property of the universe. We believe that at an absolute level, time flows in one direction only, the past is fixed and unchangeable, and events occur in a clearly-defined order giving rise to cause and effect.

So why is this belief a problem? One answer is that the illusory separate self lives mainly in the past and the future. It is made out of and maintained by memories of the past, and is dominated by desires and expectations for the future. Our true self, awareness, lives only in the now, and is freedom itself. So we need to be open to the possibility that the past and future have no real existence.

In order to provide support for this possibility, in this paper we investigate more deeply the validity of our beliefs about time, both from the perspective of our own direct experience, and also from the vantage point of physics. We don't need to arrive at any conclusion. The aim is simply to dismantle our in-built belief system about past and future, and instead of providing more knowledge, to deliver more not-knowing.

Here is Francis's approach to investigating the possibility that the past is not fixed in stone and that time is an illusion:

FL: Our view is that the past is well-defined, but that the future is not, because there is freedom. That's true if we consider time to be real. But if time is an illusion, everything changes. That which changes then, is that neither the future nor the past is fixed in stone.

So for all practical purposes, yes, the past is fixed. But from the vantage point of consciousness, that's a dream. And the time in this dream is an illusion in the same way as the time that elapsed in our night dream is an illusion. For instance, in our night dream, the time can be defined in terms of the chronology and in terms of duration. Chronology is an order-relation between events – event A happens after or before event B. That's one aspect of time. And the other aspect of time is duration – how many hours or years elapsed between event A and event B. So that's the two aspects of time.

If we go back to our night dream, we have two events that we experience during the night dream. And if we look at these events from this double vantage point of time: first does it make sense that event A in our night dream happened before or after event B? And then the time that elapses between event A and event B. Now I go back to the first aspect, that event A happened before event B. It doesn't make time, because both event A and event B are illusions. So what sense does it make that an illusion happened before or after an illusion? It makes sense from the vantage point of the waking state in which we have a different time elapsing. But if we use this metaphor to try to think the unthinkable, which is consciousness, in consciousness there is no time which elapses. So the time of the waking state, in this metaphor, corresponds to absolute simultaneity or timelessness or eternity, or whatever you call it. There is no time – there is only consciousness.

So from the vantage point of consciousness, if time gets created, fine. But it is an illusion. So the past is an illusion just as future is, meaning that the past is not cast in stone.

What is interesting is that there are physical theories – a little far out – that take into consideration this possibility, that at the very microscopic level, there wouldn't be time, and that time would appear just as an illusion that would be the thermodynamic type of averaging of a great number of microscopic events which would be timeless. So that time would be an emergent thermodynamic quantity that doesn't exist in itself at the microscopic level. To give you an example, pressure. At the microscopic level there is no pressure. At the macroscopic level we measure pressure, but at the microscopic level, pressure is simply the cumulative effect of molecules of gas moving and bumping against the walls of a container, for instance. But there is no pressure at the molecular level. So pressure appears when we change scale, in the same physical theory about time.

So time is not a fundamental reality, even from the vantage point of physics, perhaps, as it seems to be. We have always to remember that we have access to the universe through the very narrow window of our senses. And we look at it from our scale, the human scale. And when we go far out into high energies or low energy scales, things may be different. So we cannot extrapolate what our common sense is telling us about reality. We have to be very careful. And that applies in particular to time.

The reason I am mentioning that, is that we have to be open to the extraordinary possibilities about time, including that the events of the past are not cast in stone.

[Francis Lucille, April 2019: [Consciousness, Time & Free Will](#)]

In a recent discussion with Francis, I pursued the idea that past events are 'not cast in stone':

JB: In Monday's meditation, you said: 'be open to the possibility that the past is as uncertain as the future'. Is there an implication that the past can in some way be changed?

FL: Why not? If time is the absolute reality, the past cannot be changed. Provided we see time as not simply as a reversible variable in the equations of physics, but we see it also with the arrow of time and the entropic principle – the second principle of thermodynamics – then from that vantage point, time is not reversible. But that assumes – and it's a big 'if' – that time and space are absolute.

JB: Right. And I guess it assumes that the scientific models that use them are correct.

FL: The scientific models are correct within their domain of application. The problem is that the two main models we have regarding time, they beg to differ. So we don't have a unified theory of time. But what I'm saying is really beyond physics; it's more a philosophical thing. Even if we had a unified theory, this theory would still be a model.

Let's put it this way. It is very clear for us, that from the mind's perspective, the past is created in the now. Let me explain that. When we dream, we dream that there was a past to this dream, for instance we dream we have children, and these children are already grown-ups. So it means that in the dream there was a past. When we wake up, we realise that this past was made in the moment of the dream. So in the waking state, psychological memory which appears in the form of recollection is made in the now, like any other thought. So psychological memory is not absolute proof that the event we are remembering really took place. All you have to do is to use the analogy of the past of the dream.

So for instance, in an idealist perspective in which there is only mind, the past is an illusion. In the same way that the objective 'now', the phenomenal 'now' is also an illusion from this vantage point. It's all a creation of mind. But if we move away from this idealist model, if we

choose a realist model, there could be models that accommodate the existence of things independently from mind, in which time is not primary, but secondary, derived from a deeper reality which is timeless. Actually, even in physics there have been attempts in this area to use some equations in which the variable of time disappears. But that would take us in a different area. But let's say that it is possible to formulate physical theories, physical models in which time is not primary.

JB: When I think of events that are witnessed by many people, for example, the weather, then I can be much more sure about what the weather in England was like a fortnight ago, because lots of people will have measured the weather, whereas I'm not at all sure what it's going to be like, and no-one can be sure what it's going to be like in England in a fortnight's time.

FL: Yes. Perhaps. But on the other hand, if you are of the deterministic persuasion, you would say the future is conditioned by the current events, and there is a constant chain of causation that links past, present and future. If we look at the theory of general relativity, there is a block – what we call a 'block universe' – which is a block of space-time which comes full and complete, with its past and its future. Because time is only one of four dimensions of this block of space-time. This block of space-time is given. In other words, tomorrow is as certain as there, now – there, being one mile away from here, and now, at the same time. So what is happening there, now, is no more certain than what is going to happen one second from now, here.¹

What I'm trying to do is just deconstruct all kinds of belief systems that we have about reality that we take for granted. I'm not trying to replace them. Just be open to the possibility that the past is not written on a stone. That it can be changed or erased in some circumstances.² ...

So all I'm trying to do is to take everything we know for certain with a grain of salt. That's all. Be open to all kinds of possibilities. Just as if I take another physical theory in the quantum mechanics area, you have the Everett interpretation of quantum mechanics in which somehow all possibilities, at every moment, actualise. And it's just that the universe branches out in several branches. In one of the branches Schrödinger's cat is found to be alive, and in the other branch Schrödinger's cat is dead. So constantly, all the possibilities actualise, but communication between these various branches of the universe is no longer possible, and we cannot communicate with the others. So what does the past mean, you see? What does the future mean? What does time mean, what does an event mean, in this model? And again, I'm not attached to that. I'm saying that so we can think out of the box of cultural ideas. We have received cultural concepts that are in fact relative, and that we hold for absolutely certain.

Let's put it this way: phenomena are not as certain as the reality that perceives them. They are certain as they happen, because as they happen, you cannot dissociate the phenomenon from its noumenon. They are one. But regarding other than that, in past and future there is a dissociation between the phenomenon and the noumenon. The phenomenon is allegedly a past phenomenon. But the noumenon is always right here, right now, in this eternal now. So the phenomenon beholds its reality from the noumenon, as it happens. But the reality of a past

¹ For more information on the various scientific models of time, see physicist Carlo Rovelli's book, *The Order of Time*, or his Royal Institution lecture [The Physics and Philosophy of Time](#). Both are aimed at non-scientists, and are easy to understand.

² For another example from physics, see the SAND talk by the physicist Shantena Augusto Sabbadini, [Laozi and Quantum Physics](#)

event or of a future event is not there, because it exists only as a memory or as a projection. The only thing we are certain of is the now. Reality is only in the now.

JB: Yes, I can feel that. I can certainly feel that the past and the future are less certain than now. It was really more that they were equally less certain ...

FL: But remember, I'm not saying that it doesn't look that way. Yes, it does look that way. We live in this world and there is past and future, and we make appointments, and we make projects, and we remember past events. Yes. I'm not pretending it doesn't look that way. I'm just going to the ultimate reality of all of that, and asking the question 'what can I be absolutely certain of?'. And that's where we have to be extremely demanding. And we have to understand that we are not certain of yesterday or of tomorrow in the same way that we are certain that there is something rather than nothing. And that there is awareness, now.

JB: Yes, that's clear to me.

FL: So, meaning that the past and the future are less than certain. Right?

JB: Yes.

FL: If the unit by which we measure certainty is the certainty we have that there is something rather than nothing, and that there is awareness here and now, and if we attribute to this certainty 100% or 1, well, everything else is less than 1. ...

Let me add something to that. In a way sometimes life rewrites the past. There are cases when serendipity rewrites the past. For example, someone comes with a biopsy result of cancer, of malignancy. So it looks like a very certain event. And in fact, later on a correction comes from the lab saying 'Oh no, there was a mistake, we mixed the samples, in fact the biopsy was negative'. So in this case, there is a very clear explanation that doesn't put in question the fact that the past was carved in stone, which is 'yes, a mistake was made by the lab'.

But there is another interpretation also. If we see that every now comes with its past, instantaneously the past gets rewritten in the now. Because the memories from the past – both physical and psychological – their reality is in the now. So we don't know about other possible pasts. We know only about one past, in the now. All the other possible pasts get erased in the now, because out of all of the possible past outcomes – just as we have the future – only one is selected in the now. It's a kind of collapse of the wave function, if you will, that applies in hindsight.

[Francis Lucille webinar, 7th March 2021]

In an earlier webinar, I discussed with Francis the idea that that all time is eternally present, and asked whether we could consider every possibility to also be eternally present. We went on from there to discuss the concept of memory:

FL: Yes. That is very true that every possibility is eternally present in consciousness. ... What you said about this constant transformation between potential and actualisation is a very general principle. So when we talk about physics, almost everything in modern physics is based on this notion of potential and actualisation. ... So everything that is related to movement and to actualisation, because any actualisation in fact, is a form of movement. Any form of existence which elapses in time is in the form of change, of movement. ... So in the course of the movement there is this constant exchange between potential and actual. So these are the very deep, deep intuitions that relate to the one you had about the potentiality of the reality of

awareness and the actualisation in the manifestation, that are at the very root of the most modern physical theories.

JB: If everything is in potential, then everything in the past is in potential, as well as everything in the future. So memory seems to refer to a path through all of that, an actualisation of all of that potential. Is that right?

FL: Well, memory is only in the now. Memory appears as recollections and whether that's psychological or whether that's physical memory like the presence of fossils in ancient rocks that tells us that this limestone once was in the bottom of the ocean. That's the story, right? But this limestone is currently made of all these particles being created and annihilated out of a timeless background so to speak.

JB: Some non-dual teachers use the idea that memory is only in the present therefore the past doesn't exist. But I don't find that satisfactory, because two people may agree on what happened. ...

FL: Yes. To make the claim that elsewhere in time doesn't exist is very similar to making the claim that elsewhere in space doesn't exist. So the real question is, in which form if any, does 'elsewhere' in space or in time exist? And that's a question we cannot answer one way or another. But it's not important that we cannot answer this question one way or the other, because the answer to this question is not germane to non-duality. The problem many people have is that they believe that idealism for instance, is germane to non-duality, so if we are not an idealist, we cannot have non-duality, that non duality implies idealism. That's simply not true.

So returning to the question of memory, memory refers to some events which are elsewhere in time and it's analogous to some events elsewhere in space, like Shanghai right now. So do we deny it or not? So that is how it ties to idealism versus realism. ...

Time and space are not primeval. In pure awareness, there is *no* time; time and space are not primeval. That which is primeval is reality, and out of reality time and space arise. Perhaps they arise at a certain level, at a certain scale of energy or something like that. But time and space are not really necessarily the foundation of reality. So awareness is *prior* to time and space. So that's why the experience of awareness is both eternal and instantaneous. These are expressions to qualify this experience, that only tell us that it is *impossible* to qualify it in terms of time or space. Time belongs to awareness: awareness doesn't belong to time.

Awareness is the substance of everything we experience. That's a general rule. In particular, the substance of time and space is nothing else than awareness, and the experience of time and space is the experience of awareness. And that is true of any object. ...

My answers – what they can do, I hope they do, is instead of bringing more knowledge, that they bring more unknowing. More humility. You know the Shakespeare 'there are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy'. Right?

[15th August 2020, Francis Lucille webinar³]

³ The full transcript of this dialogue is available in the Files Section of the Facebook group [The Direct Path Study Group](#), in the document titled '[Three Dialogues About Not-Knowing](#)'.

Contemplation

To be in the now doesn't require any effort, any activity, any mindfulness: only the understanding that we have always been in the now, we have never been in the past or in the future. No effort is required to be back home. To be somewhere else than now, is effort.

[Francis Lucille, 12/3/2021 Meditation: The Now is Our Real Mansion]