

ALE04373

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SOME REFLECTIONS ON TIME AS A PHENOMENON WITHIN SCHOOL

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ABSTRACT *“What time is it?”, “When are we going to have a break?”* These questions are probably recognised by most people who are working in the school. The questions demonstrate clearly how time controls a large part of the everyday life of the school.

Time is linked to one of the most basic questions of philosophy, and several philosophers in the course of history have discussed questions concerning time. The present paper tries to elucidate time as a phenomenon, and especially to focus on the school’s relation to time.

To provide a historical background, the paper begins with a short retrospective survey of what certain philosophers have thought and written on the subject of time. Does time exist in itself? Or does time exist only through people’s experience of it? We can pause to reflect on the thesis that time, considered from one perspective, exists through people’s being-in-the-world and through their experience of the same. Within different organisations, for example the school, time must be regarded as being under strict chronological control. This time-control influences, of course, the experience of time within the school, and the subject experience of time can be called “subjective time”, or rather – *lived time*.

INTRODUCTION

“What time is it?”, “When are we going to have a break?”, “Are we going to finish soon?”, “I don’t have the time to finish this!”, “Sorry I’m late, but I didn’t hear the bell ringing.”, “My watch was showing the wrong time!”, “What, is it over already?”

These questions and statements are probably recognised by most, or in reality probably by “all” pupils, teachers and other adults who are working or have, at some time, been in the school system. The questions also demonstrate clearly how time controls a large part of the everyday life and the activities of the school. This time-control materialises through the school clock, which in an extremely tangible manner influences the activities of the school and divides the everyday life of the school into different 40 minute periods, different time modules or other frameworks controlled according to

time (Alerby, 2000). Consequently, the clock plays both a major and a central role within the school, as illustrated by the pupil's comments cited above. Every school day, the ringing of the school bell causes thousands of pupils and teachers to change places so that everything happens in the right place and at the right time (Westlund, 1996). But then, what is time?

Time is linked to one of the most basic questions of philosophy. For example Heidegger (1992a; b) claimed that: "Time too is nothing. It persists merely as a consequence of the events taking place in it. There is no absolute time, and no absolute simultaneity either" (Heidegger, 1992a, p 3E). Or as Augustine famously expressed about time: you know what it is, up to the moment someone asks you to describe it (Armstrong, 2000).

Several philosophers in the course of history have discussed the question of time (see for example Heidegger, 1992a; b; Le Poidevin & MacBeath, 1993; Newton-Smith, 1993; Russell, 1996), and as can be gathered from the quotation above, Heidegger would probably have answered that: "Time is nothing." Immanent in the question about what time is, there are also other questions to be addressed. These include whether time exists in itself, or if time exists only through people's experience of it? Could time have had a beginning? Can time have an ending?

Without claiming to draw a fully comprehensive picture of how the phenomenon of time has been treated by philosophers in the course of history, it is my desire, nevertheless, to highlight briefly certain subjectively chosen philosophers concerning their view of time. This does not mean that I seek the answer to the question what time *is*. Rather, my intention is to illuminate and discuss time in relation to school. In the everyday life of the school, time is often valued and used as a measure of activities, and the time structure within the school has as one of its tasks to regulate activities and control the pupils. Time must be regarded as an essential part of school. However, before the notion of time is illuminated in relation to school, and as a point of departure, let me provide a historical background. This short retrospective survey of what certain philosophers have thought and written on the subject of time will then provide a background for the subsequent discussion of the school's relation to time.

THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF TIME

Aristotle considered time as motion that can be stated in numbers, even if it is thought to be unclear why he considered the possibility of stating time in numbers to be so essential. Moreover, he was of the opinion that there was reason to ask oneself whether time could exist without the soul. The reason for this was that there could not be anything to count if there was no one to count it (Russell, 1996). Aristotle also claimed that: "Time is that within which events take place" (Aristotle's, *Physics* IV ch 11, 219 a ff, in Heidegger, 1992b).

According to Augustine, time was created simultaneously with the world, and God was considered as eternal in the sense of being timeless. This means in turn that Augustine considered that God was not affected by the relation of time, but that all time was present in Him at once. These thoughts led Augustine to a relativistic theory of time. According to him, neither the past nor the future is anything real. Instead only the present is real, but, nevertheless, both time past and future time exist. However, this point of view includes contradictions, and one way to avoid these was for Augustine to say that the past and the future can only be thought of as present (Marc-Wogau, 1991;

Russell, 1996). “The present of things past is memory, the present of things present is sight, and the present of things future is expectation” (Confessions, Book XI, Chap. xx, in Russell, 1996, p. 352).

Moreover, it can be stated that Augustine’s philosophy contains the most extreme forms of subjectivism, both on the emotional level (concerning the feeling of sin) and on the intellectual level. His subjective view of time as merely one aspect of our way of conceiving the world resulted in him anticipating Kant’s theory of time.

However, first a few words on the subject of Newton’s view of time. Concerning Newtonian philosophy, it must be mentioned that Newton believed in time being composed of instants which had an existence independent of the bodies and events that occupied them (Russell, 1996).

According to Kant both space and time are subjective, and in his opinion they are also part of our apparatus of perception. Kant argued that this is the precise reason why we can be certain that everything that falls within our experience will show the characteristics that geometry and the science of time produce (Le Poidevin & MacBeath, 1993; Russell, 1996). Furthermore, Kant maintained that space and time are not concepts but forms of “intuition”. According to Kant a pure form of perception is called a “pure intuition”, and he asserted further that there are two such forms, namely space and time, with space representing the outer sense and time the inner sense. To show that space and time are a priori forms, he used two types of argument, one of which was epistemological, while the other was metaphysical, or transcendental, as Kant called it (Russell, 1996).

Husserl (1964; 1995) stressed that time is a network of intentionalities, instead of a line, and he also claimed that the human consciousness is constituted of time. Every mental process has, according to Husserl (1964), an infinitely temporal horizon, and he compares it with a stream of mental processes without beginning and end.

Merleau-Ponty (1996) is of the opinion that time comes into existence through people’s relation to things. “It is often said that, within things themselves, the future is not yet, the past is no longer, while the present, strictly speaking, is infinitesimal, so that time collapses” (Merleau-Ponty, 1996, p 412).

According to Heidegger (1992a; b) the philosophical question of time is indeed about the being of entities, and he stressed that “Time too is nothing”. Time exists, according to Heidegger (1992a) only as a consequence of the fact that events taking place in it, which is in line with Aristotle’s view of time. He also claimed that it is through our bodies we are “thrown into the world”, to use his own terminology (Heidegger, 1962), and by that we can experience time.

Ricoeur (1984; 1985) emphasises that human time ultimately comes into existence on the basis of a number of narrative connectors – the calendar, the succession of generations, and the archive, document or track. According to Ricoeur the calendar is an innovation that re-inscribes time experienced in cosmic time, which results in both a cosmologisation of time experienced and a humanisation of cosmological time. The succession of generations connects the two aspects of time and in this way establishes a historic time and a human time, which combine the experience of the finiteness of time with the biological rhythm that constantly gives birth to new generations.

Giddens (1995) emphasises that all pre-modern cultures possessed modes of the calculation of time, and, like Ricoeur (1984; 1985), he gives as an example the calendar. But time is always, according to Giddens, linked with place. To be able to tell the time

of day one has to refer to other socio-spatial markers. The key significance in the separation of time from space was the invention of the mechanical clock in the late sixteenth century, but still time was connected with space and place. All this was so until the uniformity of time, which is measured by the clock, was matched by uniformity in the social organisation of time. The standardisation of the calendar and the clock-time made it possible to separate time and place, which Giddens (1995) called the “emptying of time”. As an example of the dynamic state between time, space and place in modern society, Giddens mentions the timetable for trains. Train traffic is organised by a timetable, which makes the whole train traffic and people’s movement of trains possible.

Without forming an opinion as to whether or not time exists independently of people, we can pause to reflect on the thesis that time, considered from one perspective, exists through people’s being-in-the-world and through their experience of the same. Consequently, a person’s existence in time and space provides the prerequisites for his/her experience. This is not to be interpreted as meaning that the human body is *in* the world in the same way as external things, e.g. trees or tables. Merleau-Ponty (1996) stressed instead the fact that the body *lives in* time and space. The question that almost unavoidably appears in this connection is how people being-in-the-world experience the phenomenon of time. How we, as human beings, experience time is, for example, individual as well as situation- and context-bound. This article elucidates the situations and contexts that take place within school.

TIME IN SCHOOL

As stated above, the school must be regarded as being under strict chronological control, in which time consists of discrete now-points that succeed one another in a manner that is both objective and uniform, and in line with the Newtonian view of time. Since chronological time can be divided up into equally long intervals, time is both measurable and quantifiable, which constitutes an abstract understanding of time. This abstract understanding is only possible if one disregards the relation between time and the concrete lives of people (Bengtsson, 1998). Bengtsson is also of the opinion that it is not possible to understand time as an objective property of things in the world. Objective time presupposes, to be at all possible, a subject that already understands time. It is only such a subject that can form the thought of measuring time. Through their bodily existence, people are finite and thereby always temporal, which results in both an active and a passive relation to time. The experiences that people have through their being-in-the-world are differentiated in terms of three dimensions of time: past time, the present and the future, which cannot be transferred to one another. Augustine claimed that neither the past nor the future is real, only the present is real. As a result of the fact that time can be differentiated in three dimensions, time cannot be understood as a succession of now-points.

Accordingly, time is related to a subject that is experiencing time, and this is true in spite of the fact that the subject has not chosen to be in time or structure time into three dimensions. The subject’s experience of time could be called “subjective time”, as opposed to “objective time”, as a result of which, according to Bengtsson (1998), subjective time becomes a part of people in the same way as their breathing. However, people’s awareness of time makes it possible for them to behave actively in relation to

time. Bengtsson argues, moreover, that this subjective time can with advantage be expressed as *lived time*.

As has been stated earlier, the school system must be regarded as being strictly time-controlled, which is, of course, a fact that influences the experience of time at school. Time slips away far too quickly sometimes, while on other occasions it seems to drag on, and this is independent of whether the position of the person in question within the school is that of the pupil, the teacher, the caretaker or the headmaster. The fact that time is experienced in different ways on different occasions and by different people is not something that is unique to the school, and these different ways of experiencing time are to be found as part of people's being-in-the-world.

In connection with a previous study on the thinking of children and young people (Alerby, 1998), the children and young people participating expressed the need for time to reflect. Moreover, they criticised people's lack of time, which resulted in a stressful life situation. This experienced lack of time influences in turn, according to these children and young people, the ability of people to make crucial and long-term decisions, or, as one sixteen-year-old boy formulated the problem, "You never get the time to think. And then you only use your reptile brain and make short-term decisions ... more time is needed for reflection and meditation" (quotation in Alerby, 1998, p. 131).

WHY IS TIME NEEDED FOR THINKING AND REFLECTION?

Arendt (1958) regards a person's life as consisting of what she calls *Vita activa*, the active life, and *Vita contemplativa*, the contemplative life. People are by nature active and social beings who participate in social activities, and this life, *Vita activa*, includes the elements of work, production and action. In contrast to this active life, one finds people need to withdraw to find peace and understanding, and it is here that the contemplative life begins, which consists of the elements of reflection, volition and discernment.

In addition to being strictly time-controlled, the everyday life of the school and the activities that take place in this everyday life must be regarded, above all, as being active as opposed to contemplative, to use the terminology of Arendt, even if this activity for the most part consists of cognitive activity, as opposed to physical activity. This should in turn lead to thoughts being considered and valued positively within the school. In this connection it is extremely important to elucidate the fact that the cognitive activity going on at school is often strictly directed, which leaves little space for the pupils' own thoughts, reflection and meditation – i.e. *the really contemplative life*. There is obviously an inadequate amount of time for this. Where then is the time to be found? Can time as a phenomenon "run out"? These are questions worth reflecting on in connection with organising the activities of the school system, in order to arrange good and rewarding teaching-and-learning situations in the best possible way – situations where the pupil is allowed to be the subject that in reality she is.

Now, the main question is not perhaps whether or not time "runs out". It is rather a question of creating new priorities when allocating time, and reflecting on what the given framework of time is to contain. Postman (1995) argues that the school must regain a *meaning* where the intrinsic value of teaching-and-learning can once again become evident. In order to achieve this, Postman wishes, in discussions on education, to shift the emphasis from teaching methods to questions concerning the meaning of

teaching itself. What then do pupils experience as meaningful at school? Who in reality has the time to listen to the experiences of the pupils and take these experiences into consideration? When do the pupils have the time to really reflect and meditate during a school day? Who gives the pupils time to experience and learn through their own conditions, i.e. from their own time?

It can be stated that the apprehension of time that controls the activities of the school is neither the only apprehension nor the original one, and that it is not in agreement with children's own understanding of time (Bengtsson, 1998). Furthermore, Bengtsson asserts that, when chronological time regulates schoolwork, the result is that the pupils are turned into objects of the requirements of time. What are the consequences of the pupils not being allowed to be subjects? What happens to motivation, inclination and commitment if the pupils' position within the school is displaced from being a subject to being an object? Without this "subjective time", or people's awareness of time, they can not behave actively in relation to time.

Through reserving time for thinking and reflection, both the pupils and the teachers would be able to pause to consider the situation and/or the subject in question at a certain distance, which in the long run could help them see new perspectives. It is with the help of reflective thinking that meaning and knowledge are created, according to Molander (1993). Polanyi (1969) emphasises that every human being has silent and unexpressed dimensions within her, and Schön (1983) describes reflection as a process that can help us to visualise these unconscious and unexpressed dimensions of knowledge.

What is the meaning of time for thinking and reflection within school? If in teaching situations it means reserving time for conversations where reflection and meditation have the opportunity to develop and become deeper, it also becomes possible for the silent and unexpressed dimensions to emerge. A sixteen-year-old expressed this in the following way: "It was as if my way of thinking developed during the conversation, so that I sort of thought a little more deeply than I had done before ... I started to reflect on how I know what I know. I didn't think I knew as much as I did ... and the way in which I think" (quotation in Alerby, 1998, p. 161).

Today the "reflective teacher" is often discussed and debated, and the "teachers' thinking" movement is extensive both in Sweden and internationally (see for example Carlgren, Handal & Vaage, 1994; Schön, 1983; Strømnes & Søvik, 1987). An additional aspect that ought to be highlighted in connection with this in discussions is how much *time* is available for pupils to reflect during their school day. Creating the time and space necessary to make it possible for thoughts to grow and burst into blossom ought to be given priority by schools. It can also be emphasised that the school has to be aware of the importance of giving pupils the possibility to experience and learn through their own time – all with a view to promoting learning.

SOME FINAL THOUGHTS

"Time is nothing" is one answer to the question concerning what time is, but from the line of reasoning within this article the answer can be manifold. However, there is a clear distinction between the views of time as objective or subjective.

According to Newton, time has an existence independent of the bodies and events that occupies them, a statement that emphasises the fact that time has to be regarded as objective. But is this objective view of time relevant and important within the school? Or should the importance of time take peoples' experiences as its starting point?

Aristotle raises the question whether time could exist without the soul, and on account of this question one can ask further questions, such as for example – whether there are souls within school, or are there just physical bodies? Hopefully, the humans within school are regarded as an entirety, which include the merging of the physical and the mental, without distinguishing between the body and soul. The fact that time within school must be regarded as being under strict chronological control, a linear view of time, turns the pupils into objects of the requirements of time, which is to be regarded as a Newtonian view of time (Russel, 1996). From this fact one can note that there is an obvious risk that the pupils are regarded as bodies without souls. This is the exact opposite of the Kantian view of time. According to Kant time is subjective, and Merleau-Ponty (1996) stressed that time exists through people's relation to the world.

According to Heidegger (1962), which also has been mentioned above, we, as human beings, are “thrown into the world” through our bodies, and there are reasons, within this article, to paraphrase this statement by emphasising that the pupil is “thrown into the school”. By that statement the pupil cannot escape from the view of time that exists within the school. Due to this fact, an essential part of the life within school is to reflect over the prevailing view of time. Giddens (1995) exemplifies the dynamic state between time, space and place in the modern society with the timetable for trains. In connection with the argumentation within this article one can mention the fact that the school schedule has the same function. The school schedule serves a purpose, in the same way as the timetable for trains, and makes both teachers and pupils be at the “right” space and place at the “right” time. It permits the complex co-ordination of the activities within school and of the people within this organisation.

Immanent in the existing view of time within school one can highlight the fact that school pursues the calendar strictly, which is one of the narrative connectors that human time ultimately comes into existence on, according to Ricoeur (1984; 1985).

Finally, it can be emphasised that time can, or to press the point further, time must be related to a subject that is experiencing time, and the school must also give space and time to the pupils to experience and learn through their own time. Within this article it has also been arguing that the subject experiences of time is called “subjective time”, or rather – *lived time*.

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