

Time without mist, for Palmyra

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When you think about it dispassionately, time, which is often held to be something special, elusive and indefinable, something that 'flows' of itself, cannot in fact be held to be more than the measurement of change with the help of memory against record. With the help of our cognitive apparatus, enhanced with increasing amounts of prosthetic technology, we measure one change against another, thereby organising our lives in relation to our world. The feeling of a continuity of time comes with this ability to observe, record and organize change in memory, making sense of it in terms of sequence and character. Our recording of time is itself a process of bodily transformation: the production and dissolution of memories and records to form experience, allowing expectations, hope and surprise. To feel that 'nothing is changing' is not to assert that this is true in any quantitative or literal sense; it is rather a way of registering frustration or despair with a particular aspect of life that appears to need a disruptive qualitative change, rather than the eternal rhythm of familiar recurrence.

If this is reasonable then the accuracy of time forms a curious problem. Accuracy is...what exactly? It cannot really be more than the effective organisation of events in carefully calibrated sequences. We find we are able to do this with the help of recurrent cyclical transformations, such as the rhythms of the sun and the moon or the pulses emitted by a crystal or other atomic structure. We have come by the 'accuracy' of the atomic clock through a long heuristic process, exchanging one regularity for another, and with each 'improvement' we have achieved better predictions of change, at least with regard to the processes studied in physics and chemistry. It is as well to realise, before we start believing that time as record or memory is something that has an independent existence beyond our constructive efforts at building a life, that such accuracy matters only to whom it matters, to physicists and inventors of technological applications. Through them does such 'accuracy' eventually come to matter to us, grateful users of increasingly sophisticated technology.

Accuracy is the product and the raw material of technological development. It brings us complex lives. However, the rest, the universe as a whole, simply does its thing according to its pattern and capacity. Beyond life, time cannot be said to exist in the same way as it does in life. Out there is relation and change. It is what we, the living, experience as space and time respectively. What matters to us, as situated creatures amidst these transforming relations, is the capacity to synchronise and fit ourselves within our world. To this end we use our technology and make our artefacts. This process has given us marvellous constructions of experience such as the genius of time and place, our hope for the future, regret about the past, stature within the idea of history, as well as wonderful and beautiful things, all of which are never more than the idea raised in us, even though we act upon them, making more things, and making more things happen, making enjoyment and hate possible.

These ideas and genii come to have a real presence. For our actions, our *doing* and *making* are measured in memory and on record and become the very stuff of our lives. It is in this way they become aligned to the significance we give them through our use of them. In this narrow sense we are truly God-like, we have built beginnings and ends *ex nihilo*, we have created purpose. The destruction of memory, of documentary records, of the material artefacts of history is then a destruction of both nothing and everything. Of nothing because destruction matters only in so far that it might matter to some of us, and everything because without records and memory there is absolutely nothing left.