

ARIADNE'S THREAD

A Question of Time



A few readers have remarked to us on the slightly delayed time of this issue. But before becoming distracted with the filling of a linear time, we ask "What is the question that time is carrying for us?"

In a conversation, Craig Holdrege whose book is reviewed in this issue, puts this sense of continuity of time most provocatively (private conversation):

'There is this strange notion out there that evolution happened in such a way that there was something like a Big Bang, there were origins of life, first organism and then at some point in time, depending on how you label things, the first human being arose. To me that is a completely erroneous way of looking at things because if it is true that we are connected with all of the rest of the world, then we are there from the very beginning, not as human beings, but as life.'

Time is most fundamental to physics and yet its greatest anomaly. Everything we know, all the concepts and the description of their interrelatedness, happen because first there is something called time. Time is the medium of change. But how do we then define time if we need time to be the medium of how things change to know themselves?

For Newton the answer was obvious: God had given time to the mathematician as an insight into the divine thought in creating the world. But as the world has moved on from Newton, it is quite anomalous that we have come up with no further elucidation of time. Instead we always surreptitiously substitute some background process that is changing for "time." So time is both fundamental and derived from everything else, an unsatisfactory state of affairs.

This notion of time as an external measure to be filled as far as possible with activity stops us from examining what time is. How does time appear then to native peoples? In ancient cultures time was lived in the rhyme of good and evil, gods and men, life and death. Time was the meeting point of the spiritual dictate of Heaven and the mortal fragility of earth. Time was a threshold in which even gods could find their comeuppance from humans. Time did not pass as a measurable commodity, it collected itself through myths and was savoured.

Time is something we experience rather than something we describe as a reality outside us. The division of time into past, present and future, robs us of the very quality of time, which is to allow whole existence to play out in ways that subtly divulge its finite nature.

In modern science there is a symmetry regarding time. There are solutions to equations that go backward in time, working from the future to the past. These are known as advanced solutions, where something happens, the cause of which is still in the future. One explanation for the invisible but effective dark matter in the universe is of time foreshadowing its own meaning.

Another way of understanding this advanced time, is in language. A good joke works because the whole disclosed at the punch line is quite different to the causal sense we make in the telling. Language suspends the sense we make of the words until the whole meaning is visited at the end. In language we are living meaning as the embodiment of a future originating disclosing. This brings us back to Craig's quote at the beginning.

Can we see evolution as both a happening from the past and a developing into future meaning?
This is the question of time for us.

Philip Franses