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Mini Review

A Methodology for Understanding Time

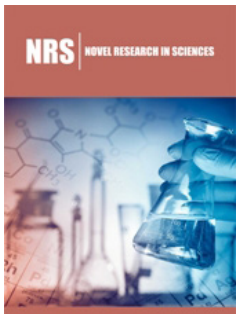
Patrice F Dassonville*

Freelance researcher

Abstract

A methodology which shows that time is a concept instead of a physical phenomenon.

Keywords: Concept; Multidisciplinary; Field effects



***Corresponding author:** Patrice F Dassonville, Freelance researcher

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Introduction

Theorizing of time consists of defining it, uncovering its nature, and identifying its properties. For this purpose, the methodology is crucial in order to avoid ending up in a dead end. We should say in dead ends, as there are so many pitfalls, which we must absolutely get rid of: preconceived ideas, everyday language, metaphors, impotence of dialectics[1], failure of intuition, interposition of ideologies. We had to find an effective strategy from what is known about time and its origins, and implement an appropriate methodology, thanks to a multidisciplinary approach.

What is known about time?

At the outset, intellectual honesty forces us to admit that we knew nothing about time: for example, we were unable to define it and to describe its nature. We started by doing an inventory of what was written, of what was currently said, and what was known, about time. We have consulted dictionaries including the Encyclopédie [1] and the Oxford English Dictionary. We read works of Bergson (1859-1941), Jung (1875-1961), Freud (1856-1939), Alain (1868-1951), Heidegger (1889-1976), Nietzsche (1844-1900), Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961), Shakespeare (1564-1616), Kant (1724-1804), among many thinkers; and recent works of physicists such as Hawking, Klein, Prigogine, Changeux, Penrose, Pascoli, Einstein, Reeves. At the end of this survey, the result was clear: nobody could say more than « time is ... ». It was quite disappointing, and such doldrums required doing otherwise, knowing that any failure provides additional information to be taken into account: the approach should be multidisciplinary, with an indirect procedure.

The geo-historical origins

In what form and when has time appeared? Two urgent questionings arose: was time discovered, or was it invented? In either case, under what circumstances? A geo-historical investigation was developed in Egypt, in Greece, in Persia, in Rome, among the Maya, in Africa, in India, in China, in Phoenicia, in Mesopotamia. We have questioned Horace (65-8 BCE [2]), Herodotus (484-425), Thucydides (c.465-c.395), Ovid (48 BCE-18 CE), Plutarch (c.46-c.126), Lucretius (c.96-55 BCE), Flavius Yossipos (c.37-c.100), Plato (428-348), Ptahhotep (c.2400 BCE), Tacitus (55-120), Epicurus (341-270), Homer (9th/8th Century BCE), among many other scholars. Let's remind three precursors of temporality: The idea of rebirth after death : the winged Sun (Figure 1) appeared in Egypt during the second half of the fourth millennium and spread across Egypt and a large part of western Asia (Phoenicia, Babylonia, Hittite, Assyria, Persia, Mesopotamia). We did not find any on Greek and Roman architecture as well as in numismatic. The spread wings of the Goddess Nephthys symbolize the Sun's path with the alternation of day and night, and rebirth after death, hence the idea of postmortem life. The early idea of eternity: The first pharaoh of unified Egypt, Narmer, c.3000 BCE, Mênes in Greek; his name means the one who is eternal [2]. The first unit of time: in a general work about archeology we found, concealed in a list of signs, a Sumerian cuneiform character the meaning of which is « lunar month [3] : thanks to archaeology, an unexpected information of a major importance.

[1]Dialectics: from the Greek dialectiké (art of arguing).

[2]BCE: Before Common Era; CE: Common Era.

[3]Univocal: valid one way only

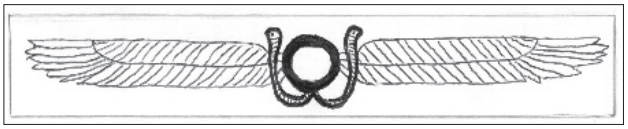

Figure 1: A sacred precursor of time and space.

From the Lunar Month to Time

It is no doubt at all the first unit of time (2800-2500 BCE); however, it is not mentioned in any work on temporality. We had then to analyze why and how Sumerians have uncovered that they could use the Moon for improving their relationships : they observed a repetition of the movements of the Moon, they called it « lunar month », a new concept, and they used it in their everyday life [4]. It must be emphasized that it is an univocal[3] relation; from an observed reality to a new concept (Figure 2). Claiming that the Moon returns to the same position every month is a fallacy.

REPETITION > > > MONTH

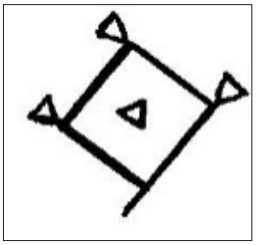

Figure 2: Cuneiform character for « lunar month.

The « lunar month » is an important invention of thought because it leads to the concept of time. It is then quite easy to define the lunar month: « The lunar month is a concept corresponding to what separates two successive repetitions » After defining the year, the day, the hour and the second, through a similar approach, we have defined time in relation to the states of a system with another univocal relation (Figure 3):

TWO SUCCESSIVE STATES > > > CONCEPT OF TIME

Figure 3: There are neither space, nor time in the Hoggar massif

The concept of time could then be defined: « Time is a concept corresponding to what separates two states of a system »

Reality and Concept

After climbing the summit of Assekrem (2790 m) in the Hoggar massif in February 1973, I came out on a stupendous mountain panorama in the foreground and mountains in the sand mist in the background (Figure 3). That day there was no wind, no bird, not a noice, not a change, not a movement, I felt that time had stopped, and that it was a Dantesque vision of space. Instead, I could only observe mountains and sand mist; I was deceived by some kind of trick of nature, what I call a Technical Effect of Field : given that space and time are concepts, they are in no case observable [5,6].

Conclusion

Time has long been considered a mysterious phenomenon, probably by reason of field effects, which caused especially the failure of dialectics. Given that time is everywhere, the methodology would be based on a multidisciplinary investigation: it allowed the uncovering of the oldest trace of time, one of the most successful and helpful concepts.

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