

**AN ANALYSIS OF THE VARIEGATED EVOLUTION OF TIME: FROM ANCIENT
TO POSTMODERN TIMES**

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Abstract: *The study traces the evolution of the concept of time from ancient to postmodern times. It explores how great philosophers, theoreticians and scientists have treated the idea of time during different periods. The research ascertains that despite the variegated nature of the development of the concept of time, much of human history has observed alternate periods of the linear, teleological and cyclical, non-teleological conceptions of time. The study has established that the same alternating trends mainly influence the human perception of time during the modern and postmodern eras. It also indicates that the progressive and teleological view of time resonates well with the spirit of the modern age. On the other hand, the research argues that the perpetual present, as a non-teleological notion of time, typifies a static time-world. The perpetual present remains disconnected from the past and the future and asserts its centrality to the postmodern sense of time.*

Keywords: *Time from Ancient, Postmodern Times, Teleological View, Modern Age, Postmodern Sense of Time*

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1. Introduction

Something essential continues to draw us back to the nature of time. (Rovelli, 2018, p. 2). From the water clock to digital watches and from Heraclitus to Hawking, time has always enchanted the human mind. Many prominent philosophers and intellectuals of the world have contemplated on the nature of time. Notwithstanding the philosophical and scientific inquiries spanning millennia, time has endured as a mystifying subject of study. Five thousand years ago, the ancient Egyptians, looked upon time both as cyclical and linear. Greeks mostly conceptualized time as cyclical. During the medieval period, the universe was believed to have a fixed beginning and a determinate past. In the early modern period of Renaissance, a linear notion of time commonly prevailed. Newton adhered to the idea of absolute time. Enlightenment philosophers put forward a dynamic and teleological idea of time and history. In the early twentieth century, Albert Einstein viewed time as relative to the observer's motion. Through the Modern era, with the emergence of latest scientific and philosophical theories, many new facets of time came to light. Nonetheless, the teleological concept of time remained predominant during that time. Oppositely, the perpetual present, a cyclical and non-teleological notion of time, became prevalent during the postmodern period. Generally, two conflicting views, however, of the teleological and non-teleological character of time have dominated and impacted the human thought during the twentieth century.

2. Literature Review

Different thinkers and philosophers have studied the idea of time from a variety of

perspectives. The following is a brief review of the related literature.

Time is an age-old problem. Both linear and cyclical views of time seem to be equally old. Haymond (2008) affirms that five thousand years ago, the ancient Egyptians conceptualized time both as cyclical and linear and they used the term "neheh" for cyclical time and the term "dject" for linear, nonrepetitive time (paras. 6-7).

Cullmann (1962) confirms that in Greek thought time is a circle and not something progressive with beginning and end (p. 52). The pre-Socratic philosopher Heraclitus (as cited in Strobach, 2013) takes the passage of time to be real and believes that everything is always in flux (p. 33). Conversely, Heraclitus's contemporary Parmenides (as cited in Hoy, 2013) views change and motion as an illusion (p. 17). In the fifth century BC, Plato (Cornford, 1997, p. 97) treats time as a dynamic and progressive entity and describes it as "the moving likeness of Eternity."

During the Renaissance, Francis Bacon propounds a linear conception of time (as cited in Lobo, 2008, p. 396). Newton (as cited in Sartori, 1996, p. 2) also adheres to the idea of linear time; he also believes that time is absolute and independent of space.

The notion of linear and teleological time reigns supreme during the 18th and 19th centuries and the first half of the 20th century. Wang (2008) testifies to the ascendancy of the foregoing conception of time in these words: "From the mid-eighteenth century onward, the notion of linear time began to seep into virtually all aspects of European consciousness, and would eventually become a governing force in the nineteenth century" (p. 99).

McIntire (2008) endorses the teleological thrust of time during the modern era by saying that the modern world was quickly shifting, and time was conceived as a continuously fluctuating and fading thing during the period. This sense of time amounted to the simultaneous creation of a new time and mourning and eulogizing of the old (p. 2). Tester (1993) advocates that a sense of history was essential to the modern awareness of time; he considers the passage of both time and history as a redemptive march towards “the moment of arrival” (p. 123).

Claydon (2020) confirms that modern sense of time was marked by a dynamic, linear and chronological pattern. He also points to the rapid pace of human life and time during the period. It was a progressive world of human action, which was ceaselessly driven forward towards a better future (p. 13).

On the other hand, the postmodern world is shackled by a static sense of time. It no longer has any faith in the past and the future and is ceaselessly shaped by the perpetual time of the middle. Kane (2020) endorses that the postmodern sense of the present is “cut off at both ends” (p. 94). Further, the theorist Baudrillard’s (1994) idea of the perpetual present aptly depicts this postmodern temporal condition, which is rooted in the eternity of “the here and now” (p. 115).

The study is distinguished from the previous studies owing to its exploration of the variegated evolution of the concept of time. It holds importance because of its identification of two dominant trends such as linear teleological time and cyclical, non-teleological time throughout human history. These alternating trends have been influencing and shaping humans’ perception of time during different periods of history. To the best of the authors’

knowledge, no previous study has examined the evolution of time in sufficient detail, nor has any study investigated the two foregoing major temporal trends in a parallel manner. This research is an attempt to address that gap.

3. Research Methodology

This study is evolutionary in nature. It uses qualitative mode of research. It deals with the development of the concept of time. The research considers how the notion of time has been regarded by various philosophers and theoreticians throughout human history. Keeping in view the demand of the nature of the research, different views of time have been mentioned in a chronological sequence. The study traces the history of the concept of time spanning millennia. The research summarises diversified notions of time from philosophers belonging to different times and places. The study is designed in such a way that the concept of time is the central subject, while different views on time, which are presented one by one, are subsumed under the grand idea of time. The current research considers the varied notions of time from ancient Egypt to postmodern times.

4. Discussion

4.1 Egyptian and Greek Concept of Time

The issue of time is as old as the world itself. Haymond (2008) maintains that five thousand years ago, the ancient Egyptians regarded time both as cyclical and linear. They used the term “neheh” for cyclical time and the term “dject” for linear, nonrepetitive time (paras. 6-7). Still a methodical study of time commences with Greek philosophers. Most Greek philosophers think of time as cyclical. Cullmann (1962) confirms that in Greek thought time is recognized as a circle and not something dynamic with beginning and end (p. 52). The pre-Socratic philosopher Heraclitus (as cited in

Strobach, 2013) considers the passage of time to be real and believes that everything is always in flux (p. 33). Contrarily, Heraclitus's contemporary Parmenides (as cited in Hoy, 2013) treats change and motion as illusions. To him, time is motionless and there is no becoming (p. 17). Parmenides's apprentice Zeno of Elea also views change and movement as illusions.

In the fifth century BC, in *Timaeus*, Plato (Cornford, 1997, p. 97) portrays time as "the moving likeness of Eternity." In simple words, he looks upon time as a moving reflection of eternity. Later, in the fourth century BC, Aristotle (as cited in Falcon, 2013) propounds the view that time depends on change for its existence. He considers time to be "an aspect of change" (p. 50). Further, he thinks that time is infinite.

4.2 St. Augustine's View of Time

A few centuries later, St. Augustine presents a novel, psychological view on time. It is particularly connected to the aspects of time; the past which is "no longer" and the future which is "not yet," while the present, in the middle, is also interminably disappearing. Augustine's (2006) often quoted words aptly describe this predicament of time: "What, then is time? If no one asks me, I know what it is. If I wish to explain it to him who asks me, I do not know" (p. 254). Nevertheless, he ultimately states that the past, the present and the future are the times of memory, direct experience and expectation, respectively. Regardless of the perplexing nature of time, Augustine thinks it is part of the created world and hence limited.

4.3 Medieval Concept of Time

In contrast to the position of Aristotle, the philosophers and theologians of the medieval era advocate the idea that the universe has a

fixed past and a determinate beginning. This idea of time is accepted by the Abrahamic faiths such as Christianity, Judaism and Islam. The 9th century Arab Philosopher Al-Kindi (as cited in McGinnis, 2013) characterizes time as limited, with a beginning and an end shrouded in the mysterious future. He argues that the world cannot have an unlimited past, as to exist infinitely into the past, it must have passed through an incalculable number of days, which is not possible (p. 79). Thomas Aquinas, the 13th century Italian theologian, also adheres to the idea of limited time. He says that the universe cannot have existed for an endless time into the past.

4.4 Renaissance: Linear Concept of Time

During the Renaissance, the linear conception of time is chiefly projected in philosophy, literature and science. At the beginning of the 17th century, the pragmatic philosopher Francis Bacon (as cited in Lobo, 2008) puts forward a linear concept of time (p. 396). Shakespeare employs both linear and cyclical facets of time in his poetry and plays. John Milton also deals with a linear, Christian idea of time in his great poem *Paradise Lost*. Galileo Galilei (as cited in Polcaro, 2013), the undisputable contributor to the birth of modern scientific revolution, propounds a linear notion of time and looks upon reality as objective and time and movement as its two elements (p. 6).

4.5 Newton's View of Time

Isaac Newton acknowledges his master Isaac Barrow's view and describes in *The Principia: Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy* (1687) his concept of linear and absolute time. Newton (as cited in Sartori, 1996, p. 2) maintains that absolute time of itself and from its own nature, flows equably without relation to anything external. In the world of Newton,

both time and space are considered as universal and absolute.

4.6 Time in the Enlightenment Period

In the Age of Enlightenment, a linear and progressive notion of time continues to dominate owing to scientific progress and the sway which Newton held over scientific minds. The Enlightenment philosophers Kant and Hegel gave a progressive and teleological idea of time and history. Wang (2008) portrays the prevalent view of time in these words: "From the mid-eighteenth century onward, the notion of linear time began to seep into virtually all aspects of European consciousness, and would eventually become a governing force in the nineteenth century" (p. 99).

4.7 The 19th Century Perspectives: Darwin, Nietzsche, Bergson

In the 19th century, Charles Darwin's stress on evolution in *On the Origins of Species by Means of Natural Selection* (1859) further reinforces the linear and progressive concept of time and history. Nevertheless, in the latter half of the same century, Friedrich Nietzsche rejects the linear notion of time and history. Nietzsche, in his work *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, advances a cyclical theory of time and history, which is reflected in his doctrine of the "eternal recurrence" of the same. He is commonly regarded as the granddad of postmodernist theory and philosophy. Significantly, he appears to have exercised a considerable influence on the postmodern sense of time. At the end of the century, in *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness*, Henri Bergson introduced two kinds of time. One was the calculable clock time. The other was the subjective concept of 'pure duration', which Bergson considered as the real time. Under his theory of duration, time

is conceived as a continual flow, which is also qualitative, incalculable and ever-present. Duration cannot be measured by means of the clock. It is suggestive of the continuation of the past into the present and flourishes in human consciousness.

4.8 Einstein's Relativistic View of Time

In 1905, Albert Einstein set forth his special theory of relativity and made time relative to the motion of the observer. Under this theory, time and space no longer remain disconnected; rather they change into one unit as space-time. Time dilation, which links the perception of time with the motion of the observer, is an intriguing facet of the preceding theory. The twin paradox indicates the effects of time dilation. It relies on a thought experiment including two twins. One of them remains on earth while the other embarks on a journey in a fast-moving spaceship. The twin on the spaceship discovers on his return that he looks younger as compared to his brother left behind on earth who has aged. The five-year space journey of the first twin becomes equal to the passage of about hundred years of time for his twin brother on earth.

4.9 The Modernist Teleological View of Time

The Modernist idea of time is dynamic and teleological. It is derived from the Enlightenment period. However, different other types of time such as Einstein's relative time, the 'inner time' of stream of consciousness, Marcel Proust's 'time of memory' described in *In Search of Lost Time* and Martin Heidegger's notion 'being is time' discussed in *Being and Time* also emerge on the horizon of modernity. But the modern time-consciousness is primarily influenced by the memory of the past and the concurrent drive to advance towards the future. McIntire (2008), depicting the world of time of

modernity, declares, “To write of time during the modernist era was to write of a quickly shifting world, to write the mutable and the vanishing; it was simultaneously to create a new time and to celebrate, mourn, and eulogize the passing of the old” (p. 2). Tester (1993) characterizes the modern sense of time thus: “A sense of history was a fundamental dimension of the modern identities. Time would redeem the identities of suffering or want in the present and thus, the passage of history was interpreted also as the passage towards the moment of arrival” (p. 123).

4.10 The ‘A’ and ‘B’ Theories of Time

In 1908, in “The Unreality of Time”, John McTaggart says that time is unreal. McTaggart maintains that the events in time happen in two ways: A-series and B-series. In A-series, events are connected to change and the distinction between past, present and future. In B-series, there is no change and the events are seen in terms of “earlier than,” and “later than” relations. A-series gives a dynamic view of time, whereas B-series indicates a static idea of time.

McTaggart’s contention paves the way for the appearance of some theories such as the Spotlight theory (all times are equally real and the movement of time is in the moving present), C. D. Broad’s the Growing Block theory (the past and the present are both real, but not the future) and the Falling Branches theory (the world is a tree: the trunk is the past, possible futures are branches) and Presentism (only the present time is real). All these theories recognize the passing of time and are called “A-theories” as they are in harmony with A-series. On the other hand, the theory of Eternalism, according to which all times, past, present and future exist, is static and does not embrace the

passing of time. It is congruent with B-series and relativity theory.

Drawing inspiration from the distinction between A-series and B-series, the philosophers of time have divided into two groups and adopted two generally conflicting ideas of time: The A-theory of time and the B-theory of time. A present-day philosopher, Craig (2012) states that the distinctions of past, present and future and temporal becoming are real under the A-theory of time, whereas the difference between past, present and future and temporal becoming are unreal under the B-theory of time. Simply put, the A-theorists have faith in the passage of time, while the B-theorists reject the passage of time.

Intriguingly, under the teleological conception of time the difference between past, present and future and the passage of time are also considered real. Hence it seems to be significantly in harmony with the A-theory of time. Conversely, under the non-teleological view of time, which is to be discussed below, the difference between past, present and future and the passage of time are considered equally unreal. Thus it appears to be closer to the B-theory of time.

4.11 Hawking’s Idea of Imaginary Time

In the last quarter of the 20th century, in his most famous work *A Brief History of Time*, Stephen Hawking (1988) introduces his notion of imaginary time and he pronounces that “what we call imaginary time is really more basic,” and “what we call real time is just a figment of our imaginations” (p. 147). Further, the ideas of beginning and end have no relevance to imaginary time.

4.12 The Postmodernist Non-Teleological Notion of Time

The Postmodern notion of time is cyclical, non-teleological. Like Hawking's imaginary time, it accepts no boundaries such as the beginning and the end. Postmodernist thinkers give great value to the present. Rather, they regard the present as perpetual. The postmodern theorists such as Baudrillard, Derrida, Foucault and Lyotard take a position against the progressive and teleological concept of time and history.

The postmodern perpetual present is related to the concept of endlessness. Correspondingly, history also appears to make no advance towards any end under this notion. Postmodern theorists deem both past and future of scant significance compared to the present. They even view the past from the vantage point of the present and no promised future seems to lie beyond their present. For example, a postmodern theorist Baudrillard is a firm advocate of the idea of the perpetual present. In his work *The Illusion of the End* (1994), he appears to establish the primacy and perpetuity of the present. He views both time and history as endless.

5. Conclusion

It may be summarised that of the concept of time has always been a fascinating subject from ancient to postmodern times. The development of the notion of time continued ceaselessly through different eras of human history, attracting many great philosophers and intellectuals of the world to contemplate on the nature of time. Regardless of the contemplative and scientific inquiries spanning millennia, time remains a perplexing object of investigation even today. Five thousand years ago, the Ancient Egyptians looked upon time both as cyclical and linear. The cyclical notion of time prevailed amongst the ancient Greeks. During the medieval time, time was considered

finite and it was believed that the universe had a beginning in time. The Renaissance period was dominated by the linear view of time. Newton advocated the idea of absolute time. Enlightenment philosophers promoted a progressive, teleological view of time and history. In the early twentieth century, Albert Einstein gave the idea of relative time, challenging the previously held objective and absolute view of time. The Modern era, roughly spanning the first half of the twentieth century, witnessed the rise of many new views of time. Most prominent among them was the teleological concept of time. The Postmodern period, in the second half of the same century, was generally preoccupied with the non-teleological notion of time. And these two opposing views of time have mainly held sway over the human mind during the twentieth century.

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