

Paper Title:  
EXISTENTIAL TEMPORALITY AS FORE-IGNORANCE

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Abstract:  
While post-husserlian thinkers in the continental tradition have studied the effects of temporality upon the subject, the analytic tradition has attempted to impose causal explanations. Thus, both arms of research in temporal studies avoid a genuinely pre-scientific approach. The attempt to capture the essence of what temporality is for subjects is distinct from what others have attempted, including the neuropsychology of time consciousness on the one hand and urgency-centric, post-heideggerian philosophy on the other. This paper takes a novel approach to the question of what time is for subjects by proposing an intrinsically simple thought experiment. Paralleling Sartre's view of temporality to some extent, this paper arrives via a different path and diverges into additional conclusions. Specifically, by means of analyzing how knowledge is divided by the three temporal categories and examining the implications of ignorance of the future set, the most fundamental feature of temporality is described.

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Explaining *time* is an analytic project for linguistic philosophers and a mathematical problem for physicists. Explaining *temporality* is a project of an entirely different sort for several reasons. This latter project deals with temporality as direct and existential. It is first and immediate. As pre-scientific it is preeminent. *Temporality* is the manner in which life is initially experienced and is thus the proper starting place for investigations into *time*. Before philosophers and physicists proceed to consider any of the various directions to which such studies may lead, a completely unfolded description of what temporality is should be obtained and carefully considered. That is, temporality should be understood by more than a word. It must be described independently from descriptions of time and without speculation into metaphysical implications.

Vital to this attempted description is the nature of epistemological access to various kinds of first-person knowledge. The nature of these categories is determined by the mode of their presentation in consciousness and are delineated into three sets according to three modes. Subsequent to this difference in presentation, the three sets are taken to be the three major tense-like temporal states. Having different forms of access to each of the three sets is a fundamental feature of experience *as* the three tenses. Thus, some first-person knowledge is taken to be about the past self, some about the present self, and some about the future self. Additionally, this three-fold division is subsequent to a simultaneous presence-absence tension with regard to the future set. That is, the future is the set of first-person knowledge that is ever anticipated, believed to exist, yet is ever inaccessible. *As* future, this set of first-person knowledge is permanently unknown.

A brief and easily-grasped thought experiment will show that the above is likely correct and that the fundamental nature of temporality is actually a species of ignorance. Here termed *fore-ignorance*, this feature will be shown to be identical with temporality. Thus, it is not a

causal explanation of what *time* is and how it actively influences the subject. It is, instead, a more thoroughly developed description of temporality in place of a “bottom-up” metaphysical description and is also ancestral to anxiety and lack of control about what the future hides from view.

### **The Experience of Time**

The work of many continental thinkers, taking the lead of Heidegger, has reached beyond the phenomenological starting point with regard to time. Temporality can be dealt with in many ways, yet, the most existentially relevant aspect of temporality is not a lack of *control* over the future, but a lack of *knowledge* of the future. Thus, before one considers the consequences of temporality, specifically anxiety over a lack of access to the self or control in avoiding pain and death, one should thoroughly recognize *what* temporality is as a mode of existing. Before proceeding to explore the implications of temporality as a lack of control, Sartre commendably looks into the ontology of prereflective consciousness and focuses upon temporality as a dominant influence upon its nature. During his investigation, he finds the tenses of experience to be of highest importance. After reviewing aspects of the past and present, he recognized that the future *as* the future does not exist within the subject at the present. Sartre is emphatic when he states that the subject cannot possess the future, except as a guess, without actually ceasing to be a subject:

The For-itself [the subject] can not be ‘pregnant with the future’ nor ‘expectant of the future,’ nor can it be ‘a knowledge of the future’ except on the basis of an original and prejudicative relation of itself to itself. We can not conceive for the For-itself the slightest possibility of a thematic foresight, not even that of determined states in a scientific universe, unless it is the being which comes to itself in terms of the future, the being which makes itself exist as having its being outside itself in the future... The For-itself is a lack. The possible [future] is that which the For-itself lacks in order to be itself. (1)

Thus, presence of future knowledge is antithetical to the For-itself that constitutes the human

subject. The only form of future knowledge allowed to the subject, according to Sartre, is, in effect, that of third-person testimony. All other access to future knowledge would, according to Sartre, destroy the subject. Though he does not go on to describe what the subject would become in such a situation, it may be inferred that Sartre believes the subject would become an object devoid of life, freedom, etc. This is because the future has the potential to radically change the mode of experience for the subject. Thus, Sartre recognizes that temporality is a constituent element of the subject, it is fundamental to the nature of the human being. Moreover, by revealing future knowledge as potentially destructive, he implies, generally, that a lack of future knowledge is preeminent within temporality.

It is proposed, to make Sartre's conclusions explicit and to go a bit further, that the most fundamental aspect of existential temporality is the fact that temporal subjects do not know their own future thoughts, deeds, and experiences in the present. This is its defining element. Time, for humanity, has a "dark side." There exist a set of moments in the temporal subject's own life the contents of which are entirely hidden from the subject, appearing as a dark void. Simultaneously, however, the void is filled with anticipations that take a form nearly identical to the rehearsal of memories.(2) It is by and through this epistemologically and inductively impenetrable "zone," the set of unknown moments, that subjects know time at all.

At each moment temporal subjects know that it is "now," they also possess, at each moment of awareness, memories of it being "now" before that time. Yet, they do not possess knowledge of it being "now" after that time. The future "begins," or appears to begin, at the edge of the unknown after this fashion. Those experiences that are currently known are part of the subject's present and past. Those that are not are part of the subject's future. In this way, subjects have direct, phenomenological access to the tenses of experience, which shall hereafter be

termed the existential A-series. Such a series must be viewed as distinct from the A-series (proper) that was first proposed by J. M. E. McTaggart and is currently being discussed within the Philosophy of Time as an analytic enterprise.<sup>(3)</sup> The existential A-series, what we have been calling temporality, may or may not be caused by a metaphysical structure. This analysis yields results that are independent of any metaphysical conclusion. That is, whether or not time is tensed or tenseless, whether or not the A-series is an actual feature of reality, the phenomenon of temporality is not dependent upon it because it can be a feature of either or neither view.

Temporality is thus a mode of existence characterized by instantaneous knowledge of the past and present without knowledge of the future. Temporality is significantly enhanced by knowledge of chronological ordering of memorial knowledge, but is not fundamentally described by this feature. This additional information, called *akoluthic* or meta-data, provides depth to temporal experience but is not definitive for it.

Of the three types of moments, named by the major tenses, there is a perpetual state of “yes, yes, no” with regard to the presence of knowledge about the past, present, and future respectively. This, fundamentally, defines temporality by dividing first-person knowledge into three distinct sets. This is what time is to the subject. This is existential time; this is temporality.

### **Time’s Tooth and its Opposite**

Temporal subjects have access to beliefs about past moments in the present. These past selves are no longer identical with the present self. They are gone, presumably never to be revisited. Subjects only have third-person access to their own past, first-person moments. Memories appear static and lifeless as they are rehearsed and are not suitable substitutes for

presence. This effect is known as *Time's Tooth*. It is a robbery from ourselves of our own selves by the temporal manner of existence. Or, it is the cutting off of our present self, from all past selves. Obviously, this is a bad thing. This is, in part, the “thrownness” and “ex-istence” with which existentialists since Heidegger have grappled. We're not just cut off from “the other,” we are cut off from ourselves. Even our own present existence is specious. Thus, the *Time's Tooth* effect is considered to be a serious “problem,” and it is often appreciated as the main objective of phenomenological description.

A complimentary problem exists with regard to the future. If the teeth of time are seen from another perspective, they also cut off the future self from the present self. In fact, the future is not only cut off, but it is also hidden. Thus, the future is worse than the past because it isn't merely distant and still, it is additionally absent and dark.

In spite of this dire situation, ironically, it is this very aspect of temporality that animates the subject. In a sense, the subject is evicted from the “now” and forced into the new “now” as the old “now” becomes “then.” As Sartre noted,

This presence is flight... Presence flees the being which it has. Toward what is it fleeing?  
... it is a flight toward its being; that is, toward the self which it will be by coincidence  
with what it lacks. The Future is the lack.(4)

Without such a movement, it is commonly assumed and often argued, that the subject could not be said to be alive because access to the future in the present prevents the subject from experiencing changes in mental state. Any being that does not change also does not live.

### **Thought Experiment: Achieving the Temporal Objective**

Temporal subjects are tempted to think about time as being necessary for thought and life. Yet, when ignorance of the future, proposed here as the fundamental cause of temporality, is

eliminated, it is doubtful whether anything like temporality can be retained. If one were to remove from the temporal mode of experiencing life all barriers to knowledge of the subject's own future, including inner thought life, how would experience of life be different? As a thought experiment, consider the following situation carefully. By some means, a person is in possession of complete first-person knowledge. Such knowledge, if complete, would include possession of all past, present, and future knowledge of all actions, thoughts, and experiences. How would this additional knowledge affect the person?

It appears that this subject would not have a sense of time, nor could the subject have a sense of freedom. Furthermore, the subject would have no basis for knowing, verifying, or distinguishing indexical knowledge with regard to time. That is, the subject would be unable to distinguish one "now" from another because the basis for such a distinction would be removed. Knowledge of the future and the past, when first-person, therefore dissolves the concept of the present. Without the present, the subject is not experiencing time temporally regardless of the actual status of time. Whether or not the future is open, whether or not it exists "already," knowledge of it destroys any meaningful distinction between the tenses in subjective experience.

To venture beyond Sartre's warning about the subject's destruction, we may ask what remains in the mind of the subject. Only earlier-than and later-than relationships may be retained. The *akoluthic* quality of the knowledge is retained while the indexical quality of the knowledge is lost. In other terms, awareness of the A-series is lost, regardless of its metaphysical status, and awareness of the B-series is retained.

### Defining the Terms of the Experiment

Immediately, the components in this thought experiment must be clarified if the conclusions are to be seen as unavoidable. First, this experiment does not deal with modal states of affairs. Potential futures are not considered. Regardless of what is possible (ontologically or epistemologically), or what is known or stated, the future under consideration is the one that *will* become available to the subject at a future “present.” This future is the one that will later be thought of as the unalterable past. It is knowledge of *this* future that would destroy temporality as a mode of experience. Thus, this strategy detours around Aristotelian-style linguistic analyses that depend upon modal features.

Second, the manner in which this knowledge is obtained, it must be noted, is irrelevant to the conclusion. The only aspects of this future knowledge that matter are its extent and quality. The subject under consideration must possess first-person future knowledge. This must include thoughts, deeds, and experiences. The subject must also know enough of this future so that knowledge does not change with time. This can only be accomplished if the knowledge is complete. This is an essential factor in the experiment. The subject does not learn anything new with each passing moment because all of his knowledge is possessed in advance.

Conclusions of the Experiment:  
The Fore-Ignorance Account of Temporality

As a result of this thought experiment, one is led to conclude that the temporal mode of experience is dependent upon fore-ignorance, that is, ignorance of this specific type of future knowledge. Regardless of whether or not temporal becoming is ontologically basic, freedom and even life as we know it would seem the same to subjects. Whether or not the A-series is compatible with the B-series and real, the experiences of temporality and freedom depend *only*



upon fore-ignorance. In other words, the experience of freedom is primarily the effect of the subject being ignorant of what it will choose regardless of whether or not it is learned, after the fact, that the subject “could have done otherwise.” Thus, the necessary precondition for the experience of freedom is fore-ignorance. Whether or not the subject is truly free is a different question. In cases where the future is metaphysically open (not yet determined), fore-ignorance is the primary cause of the experience of freedom and animation. And, in cases where the future is metaphysically closed (determined), fore-ignorance is the primary cause of the experience of freedom and animation. Thus, in both cases, the actual status of temporal becoming has *no influence* upon the effect. Thus, the phenomenological approach has fully described temporality and has effectively demoted the metaphysical project.

Nonetheless, even though ignorance of what will ultimately become real characterizes the essential temporal feature for the subject, this is a hardship for the subject. Our ability to anticipate the future, while being ignorant of its eventual content, creates the future tense. Yourgrau states that, “We do, after all, have the future tense, and this device seems to be able to lift us, in thought, out of our existential confinement to the present.”(5) However, the difference between what the subject expects and what actually comes to pass is significant and is a cause for alarm. The temporal person is in a state of anxiety due to an ever-present and inherent risk or threat to existence. The pre-reflective consciousness is also continually incapable of knowing itself. The most pressing problem involving temporality, then, is not anxiety over the future, because, prior to this anxiety concerning the future is the fact of uncertainty. Uncertainty is founded upon a peculiar species of ignorance, fore-ignorance.

### **Fore-Ignorance is Identical with Temporality**

This is an attempt to offer a complete phenomenological description (unfolding) of temporality. While most theories concerning time approach the phenomenon as a physical property of the world or as an underlying ontological structure, and a smaller portion of thinkers view the problem idealistically, the phenomenological methodology, commonly overlooked, is an attempt to describe the structure of the elements of consciousness in terms of their internal relationships. That is the methodology within which this project works. The result is the presentation of a single feature as independently and exclusively sufficient for the temporal experience. Sartre had arrived at a very similar conclusion but did not specifically separate temporality from time nor did he identify bare, existential temporality with fore-ignorance exclusively.

Temporality requires a change of mental states, but the thought experiment above revealed that full and complete foreknowledge is incompatible with a change of mental states. Therefore, complete foreknowledge is not compatible with existential temporality. Because complete foreknowledge is identical to complete absence of fore-ignorance, this absence is also not compatible with a change in mental states and therefore also precludes temporality. Conversely, the presence of fore-ignorance is *necessary* for temporality because its absence forbids it.

Fore-ignorance provides the features of bare temporality that are the recognition of the three basic tenses of temporal experience. Thus, it is a *sufficient* description. All additional elements, such as the akolouthic features of memories, while providing much depth to temporal experience, are not essential to bare temporality itself.

Moreover, as a description, fore-ignorance must relate to bare, existential temporality

either causally or identically. That is, either fore-ignorance causes temporality or it *is* temporality. Identity is the relation had uniquely between a thing and itself. It is transitive, symmetric, reflexive, and necessary. Yet, the *most* basic description (unfolding) of any idea relates to the idea itself in a way that is transitive, symmetric, reflexive, necessary, and unique. In fact, the name used of the idea is merely a symbolic shorthand for the basic description itself. Therefore, fore-ignorance fulfills the definition of identity in its relation with temporality. This amounts to a phenomenological discovery about temporality, that it is fore-ignorance.

### **Discussion**

Is this conclusion useful? If the intention of phenomenology, at least in its original form, was the pursuit of complete description of the objects of consciousness and the manner of their interrelationships, then the value of this project may be bound up with the value of phenomenology itself. Going further, there may also be implications outside of Phenomenology within the philosophy and physics of time as a mind-independent reality. If existential temporality may be equated with a peculiar form of ignorance, then it is distinct from what time is physically and metaphysically. In fact, if fore-ignorance is merely the absence of knowledge; it is a feature of absence that may be coherently formulated within *multiple* metaphysical schemes. Thus, the underlying features of time itself, whatever it is, when they have no influence upon the subject, matter little. They may even be superfluous in the consideration of many important questions. This will have the effect of reducing the relevance of these studies.

However, fore-ignorance, being the result of a phenomenological study, is not the final answer to the question. One may immediately wonder about the cause of this peculiar form of

ignorance. As one unfolds the temporal experience, one begins to see characteristics that are not recognizeably temporal. Thus, if it is noted that many forms of ignorance are possible, one wonders how such a systematically arranged ignorance, one capable of creating the temporal mode of life, could exist at all. Thus, as the most basic definition of temporality is reached, causal questions remain. What could cause this effect? Is it physical, metaphysical, or mental? Is the cause temporal itself? In this way, physical and metaphysical options reemerge. However, since the requirements are now recognized to be minimal and negative, consideration may be given to a broader spectrum of possible causes.

For example, the situation that results from the fore-ignorance account of temporality bears a striking similarity to the narrative. This ignorance exists not only as the dominant feature of our own consciousnesses, but in the characters of every normal narrative. If this is so, then there may be important implications for those who follow the philosophies of Paul Ricoeur and Jacques Derrida both of whom have questioned metaphysical assumptions and the distinction between text or narrative, and reality.

Finally, it appears that an analagous study of freedom may reach similar conclusions. If existential freedom is generated primarily by fore-ignorance, then its features come at a minimal cost as well. If temporal life and freedom are both the gift of deprivation, then it seems that the cost of creating such phenomena are not only minimal but have no positive requirement. One may even be led to question the need for a real, physical universe or any materialistic (non-mental) monism at all.

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1. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay in Phenomenological Ontology*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956), 125.

2. Arnaud D'Argembeau and Martial Van der Linden, "Phenomenal characteristics associated with projecting oneself back into the past and forward into the future: Influence of valence and temporal distance" *Consciousness and Cognition* 13 (2004): 857. See also, Karl K. Szpunar, Jason M. Watson, and Kathleen B. McDermott, "Neural

substrates of envisioning the future,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 104 (2007): 642-647. Also, Nicola S. Clayton and Anthony Dickinson, “Episodic-like memory during cache recovery by scrub jays,” *Nature* 395 (17 Sep 1998): 272-274. And, for a phenomenological description see, Mary Jeanne Larrabee, “Time and Spatial Models: Temporality in Husserl,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 49:3 (1989), 373.

3. J. Ellis McTaggart, “The Unreality of Time,” *Mind*, New Series, 17:68. (Oct. 1908): 457-474.

4. Sartre, 125.

5. Palle Yourgrau, *Gödel Meets Einstein: Time Travel in the Gödel Universe* (Chicago: Open Court, 1999), 139.