

Original Paper

On Human Responsibility

— What is Time? —

Makoto SEKIYA

*Department of Medical Social Work,
Faculty of Medical Welfare
Kawasaki University of Medical Welfare
Kurashiki, 701-01, Japan
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Abstract

Time is real but not as an immanency in the change of things or even as a categorical formality of human cognition. Time is a hidden reality.

Time is referred to when the ordering of things in sequence of before and after is necessary. The principle of causality in which the causal agent precedes the consequence is based on the order of before and after, that is, the time order.

Assessing the accountability of a person for his choice in decisions, human reflexion needs to reconstruct things in a right time order which shows which is the real agent cause. Thus, human responsibility is real because of a person's freedom in time.

Finally, time is a metaphysical reality where human freedom in personal responsibility is realized. Human responsibility for the future is also discussed in the context of the contemporary technological world.

Introduction

The world exists in the temporal order. The things in the world have their beginning and end. A person can say that what has been experienced by him has its temporal order of before and after in his memory. If it is necessary to discriminate cause and consequence in events, the cause factor will come before the consequence in time, that is, the principle of causality is founded on the time concept.

I will discuss in an introductory way the

human concept of time as metaphysical. And human responsibility will be reviewed in the light of human time consciousness.

Changes of things and time order

Human beings live in the world, the world of changes. The changes of things are described as ordered in time here and now. A picture painted by a painter is the joint product of lines drawn, of coloring and of fixed coordinations of materials on the canvas as accomplished by the painter using his

acquired techniques. The picture has emerged into the world by way of constructive steps which the painter intentionally carried out in time order.

But in the long run after harsh dry weather has discolored the colors painted on the canvas, the picture hanging on the wall of a gallery in a museum loses its brilliance attracting a crowd of people; probably the picture in the frame, faded with age, endures in its general appearance, though losing some of its attractiveness.

What is a picture in time? A picture torn up into pieces is no longer any picture at all. It has vanished from the world, while time itself goes on. What is time?

The clock with two hands to measure time has been created by the human hand and intellect. The distinction of before and after indicated by the clock with its long and short hands pointing to the numbers on its face is substantiated by the sense of time in our mind. This 'sense' means here a kind of intuition working in the mind, not in the senses of body organs or cells. When the clock is disposed of, perhaps because it did not work properly, still time in our mind endures. Then, how would it be if all human beings disappeared from the world? Would the absence of human consciousness of time annihilate time itself? It seems that is not the case. In imagination we can rise a higher level of reference and approach the level of total nothingness - no real existence at all. This seems too awesome and unimaginable, but it is possible if we neglect the existence of God.

God is eternal, then, timeless. There is no beginning and end to Him. There are no changes in Him. We cannot live without time. We do not create time, though we are born in time. Time is a preexistent reality to us.

The preconditionality of time in human

recognition was deeply analyzed by Kant by way of the innate formal frame of human cognition which is internalized in human subjectivity. Thus, the subject as an intellectual agent cannot understand the world except as a world framed in the formal categories of time and space. This categorical formality of human cognition poses a boundary condition for the human cognitive extension (that is, recognition).

In the contrast to Kant, Yanase asserts that the time we experience is essentially the same as the time created by God when the angels were created¹⁾. The time of the angels is called 'aevum' which has its beginning but not end, comparable to the eternity of God which has neither beginning nor end. Yanase claims that time is hidden reality. Time is revealed as a flowing stream which the human mind catch up to make time order out of the changes of things. Yanase's argument is that time is metaphysically given as an existential reality; thus our subjective time consciousness is provided with an objective framework of time so real that an observer of the world can depend on his measurement of time with a clock. Therefore, our distinction of before and after is not an innate categorical formality of human cognition, but comes from referring to the angels' aevum. Human beings are so related to the spiritual boundary of life that this boundary gives us the possibility of a realist metaphysics which is at variance with the framed subjectivity of Kant in which the thing in itself (*Ding an sich*) remains unknown, outside of the world.

I argue with Yanase that time is so real that no basis for time can be found in the changes of things themselves, a fortiori we should not regard it as a human creation. Cause and consequence are distinct, but this distinction is drawn only in the human mind where the causes are separated from the

consequences in the human recognition according to the real distinction of before and after in our analysis of the objects in time order. Thus, my assertion is that the time order according to the distinction of before and after provides a basis for the principle of causality in things.

Reconstruction of reality amid change

We reconstruct our human experiences in the time order of past, present and future (fundamentally in the distinction of before and after). Admitting that the world exists in changes, I maintain that the human mind reconstructs its experiences by seeing these changes in the time order in reflexion. Reconstruction is a reflexive rearrangement of objects by human act. This reconstruction may be fallacious. If the fallacy is deliberate, the reconstruction is called untruthful or a lie at the ultimate comprehension. In this sense a human being is free in his choice of how to arrange things even in the time order. But if he deliberately disarranges the order and talks as if he were describing the reality, communication is disrupted; at times very destructive because it becomes very unclear which is probable to be the cause of the event reported. Past, present and future are distinctions of time in our memory. One can remind oneself of past events. Our consciousness of time is a linear sequence of events like the course of an arrow going forward. Although I cannot discuss here in detail the problem of the time concept, I believe that the time arrow does not consist of the sequence of events, but that the distinction of past, present and future is conscientized in our reflexion, the time arrow being independently conceptualized in our mind. The clock measuring the time is a tool to standardize units of time on a scale which numbers the sequence of units in order to mark the positions of

events in the clock time scale. But the marking the positions of events on the time scale in terms of number does not constitute time itself.

I know what happened in the past, I am conscious of the present situation and, even though not thoroughly, the possible future. The things and events registered in my memory are embedded with their proper timing remarks on them. I can tell in the present that I was thinking about a certain thing a few minutes ago. When I think about things, it is in the present time, not in any other time, even when I am thinking about the past or the future. So, one can say that the past, present and future are all involved in one in the present time. I can say so far that to live means to remain able to reconstruct the events that happen in time.

To live one's own life is to be present in the present time. One's past invades the present and in sequence the present without any break invades the future. One's life looks like a continuous unique string with self-tangled knots by itself which represent one's own particulate experiences up to the present moment. An individual life has its beginning and end. It is an individual whole. I maintain that the ability of the human mind to reconstruct the events in time makes room for human free choice especially toward future.

If the choice is ethical, this ethical disposition affects the individual person in the present situation. Even when the choice was in the past, the past choice is not disconnected from the present and future. If someone has done evil or wrong in the past, or otherwise good or valuable, the responsibility of the doer remains in the present. There will be depreciation or praise. The reconstructed history of the individual life of a person cannot be derailed from the reality of time. Thus, the history of events which is reconstructed by

someone in the false time order will disturb the interpretation of the story in it.

My conviction is that time acts very stringently to make a historical order of things in change. If there were a timeless world, I could not talk about my responsibility in the world of change. My deeds and their timing are always going together, even though the way of reconstruction of experiences at times deliberately or indeliberately possesses the fallacious or misunderstood remarking of time order, while the distinction of before and after in the real order of my deeds is unchangeable.

Responsibility for the future

Jonas suggests that there is an “imperative of responsibility” for the future in his book of that title. He noticed that human responsibility has been commonly viewed in the past and present tense. Not much mention at all about future responsibility has been found in the philosophy.

Today we are encountering the environmental problem. Especially the anticipated debilitation of our living environment, if we keep up our present pace of technological progress, is at stake.

Technology is indispensable for our daily commodities and conveniences. But the unlimited practice of technology, even if its products are tremendously useful and valuable, is expected to be destructive and to consume too much of earthly material resources to be life sustaining; rather we fear it will cause the debilitation of earthly living conditions for future generations.

An individual's range of time in the physical time span reaches at least the length of his life span. We have, then, the responsibility to do our best at least for the range of our life span. Therefore, as far as an individual is concerned, it has usually been thought that

one is not so much to be burdened with the strain of limitless span of time. But today's situation of technological development urges us to make a transition from our traditional disposition to a new one in responsibility consciousness.

Jonas says:

“In the choice between man and nature as the struggle for existence poses it time and again, man indeed comes first, and extra-human nature, even with its own rights acknowledged, must give way to his superior right. Or, should the idea of anything intrinsically “superior” be questioned here, the simple rule holds that egoism of species – each species – takes precedence anyway according to the order of life in general, and the particular exercise of man's right vis-a-vis the rest of the living world is a natural right on the faculty alone. In other words, the mere fact of superior power legitimates its use. This has in practice and without reflexion been the attitude of all times, when for long the odds were by no means so clear, when often man felt more on the defensive than on the offensive, and when nature as a whole appeared invulnerable, thus in all particulars free for his untrammelled use. Western religion and metaphysics added their sanction of transcendental uniqueness to this anthropocentric bent. But even if the prerogative of man were still insisted upon as absolute, it would now have to include a duty toward nature as both a condition of his own survival and an integral complement of his unstunted being.”²⁾

Our life span is limited by life and death. Still our mind pursues a limitless time range if we attempt to expand the time scale by adding numberless counting marks, so long as time itself remains unchanged and limitless in eivity as described previously. In our mind we can mark the future in the order of time at any point along the string of time, even at

points where no possibility of our physical existence is supposed to be. How can we be responsible for such a future? Jonas explores the reason why a new concept of responsibility in relation to the time span is implicated in our present-day sense of duty.

Jonas says:

“Our comparison dealt with the historical forms of the ethics of contemporaneity and immediacy, for which the Kantian case served only as an example. What stands in question is not their validity within their own frame of reference but their sufficiency for those new dimensions of human action which transcend that frame. Our thesis is that the new kinds and dimensions of action require a commensurate ethic of foresight and responsibility, which is as novel as the eventualities which it must meet. We have seen that there are the eventualities that arise out of the world of *homo faber* in the era of technology.”³⁾

Also:

“Care for the future of mankind is the overruling duty of collective human action in the age of a technical civilization that has become “almighty”, if not in its productive then at least in its destructive potential. This care must obviously include care for the future of all nature on this planet as a necessary condition of man’s own. Even if it were less than necessary in this instrumental sense—even if (scientific-fiction style) a human life worthy of its name were imaginable in a depleted nature mostly replaced by art—might still hold that the plenitude of life, evolved in aeon (aevity) of creative toil and now delivered into our hands, has a claim to our care in its own right. A kind of metaphysical responsibility beyond self-interest has developed on us with the magnitude of our powers relative to this tenuous film of life, that is, since man has become dangerous not

only to himself but to the whole biosphere.”⁴⁾

I assume that Jonas has been persuaded that we are responsible for the future mainly by the idea of the causal chain of things. The principle of causality is true and real, because the distinction of before and after in the changes of things is never falsified. Our strategy for the future depends on our free decision, but not on the causality of reality of the world. We decide ourselves with freedom to be a possible causal agent to the future state of the world, because we live in the present. Things in the present can be a causal condition for the future only because they exist before the future. Free will is liberated from bare causality. Our free choice to be a causal agent to the future comes from our free will accompanying the consciousness of time order with the distinction of before and after which underlies the causality. Our responsibility for the future does not come from the causal chain of things, but from the consciousness of the possibility to be causal for the future because of the time order of before and after.

Future generations are also free as to whether or not to accept the decisions made in the foregoing generation in the time flow. Our responsibility, if collective as Jonas suggested, is collective not only contemporaneously but also in believing the decisions of future generations in hope.

Time is metaphysical and it also provides a foundation for the principle of causality. In one way time is rigid because of the unfalsifiable distinction of before and after, but in another it makes room for freedom from the causal necessity of things. Freedom means here that we have time to stand apart from the changes of necessity and calmly to contemplate our situations to reconstruct our life.

Conclusion

My argument has been that we need a metaphysical recognition of time for our understanding the changes of things in the world. The principle of causality is powerful and useful in our understanding of the reality of our experience only when the juxtaposition of things in the time order is realized. Causality does not make time, but time makes the principle of causality meaningful.

As far as free will is concerned, responsibility for the consequences or the realization of a purpose committed to our deeds appears more free when we are liberated from the mere causal chains of things—especially in the occasion when our causal explanation of things seems to be doubtful. We have to step back freely for a bit of time from the disturbing complex of occasion.

Thus, the implications of the question of freedom are metaphysical.

References

- 1) Yanase M (1991) Meeting God through Science—Hidden Realism—. Risousha, Tokyo pp. 1 —114
The author is an eminent theoretical physicist. He argues:
“The literature of physics reveals to us that the state function described in the quantum theory of field bears no relation to time and is what Spinoza called as “sub specie aeternitatis”. On the other hand, as long as time within the framework of the theory of relativity is considered as one of the four-dimensional coordinate axes of Minkowski space, and as long as the world line which represents physical phenomena does not include time, the expression that it is viewed as something eternal is generally acceptable to us.” pp.76—77.
- 2) Jonas H (1984) The Imperative of Responsibility—In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age —The University of Chicago Press, Chicago p.137.
- 3) Ibid., pp.17—18.
- 4) Ibid., p.136.