PASSING THE TIME

Peter Cave

Peter Cave's new book, Can a Robot Be Human? 33 Perplexing Philosophy Puzzles, *covers a wide range of perplexities and paradoxes. Here, Peter raises some timely puzzles.*

Puzzling philosophy may pass the time, but, as Samuel Beckett quipped, time would have passed anyway. Yet when, as we say, 'time passes' it is not that time does any passing or moving at all, but, rather, changes occur, events happen and things that we looked forward to in the future are, perhaps, not so good in the present and fade from our memories as they slip into the past.

That events change from being in the future, to present, to past seems essential to time's existence; it entangles us in perplexities over changes, events, causation, as well as those directly of time. Let us do some puzzle-spotting.

1. Past, Present, Future

'Being in the future', 'in the present', 'in the past' – what is the status of such properties? While you read these words, the Earth orbits the Sun. A long time before your reading, various rock formations changed and continents drifted, occurrences with long names with which only geologists are familiar. Numerous eclipses, comets trailing and stars a-shooting will occur some time after your reading, details of which only astronomers are competent to predict. In summary, things are happening, have happened and will happen – that is, some are present, some past, some future.

Now – and we should be careful with such (un)timely terms – delete all conscious beings from the events. Let us have only non-conscious happenings: geological changes and movements of clouds, planets, comets and the like. When no conscious observers exist, are some of those events still in the present? Are some past? Some future? Or, for anything

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to be in the present, past or future, must it, at least, be related to individuals having experiences, having a viewpoint?

Presumably, we should insist that, even without conscious beings, events certainly occur. And if events occur, changes occur. Some states and events come after other states and events, namely, after those which went before. In a universe without conscious beings, there would still be temporal relationships of 'before' and 'after'. But would there be any temporal properties of 'present', 'past' and 'future'? Would there be truths to the effect that things had happened; things are happening and things will happen?

Perhaps we are inclined to say 'no'. The existence of a past, present and future requires a point of view, a view from where things are, indeed, past, present and future. If there are no conscious beings, there is no viewpoint; there are just events in a 'before and after' sequence.

Were we inclined to agree that, at the very least, we need a viewpoint for there to be events past, present and future, we may become tempted by the thought that all we mean when using such temporal concepts is that some events are before, some after and some simultaneous with the viewing events. If the viewers are speakers, then when they say that certain geological changes occurred in the past, all they are really saying is that those changes occurred *before* their current utterances. The eclipses and other changes that will occur – future eclipses and other future changes – are examples of happenings *after* their utterances. Further, some of the Earth's movements are occurring at the same time as their utterances – 'occurrences now' or 'occurrences in the present'. And so, many philosophers have taken it that 'past, present and future' is reducible to 'before, after and simultaneous with', hereafter referred to as 'before and after'. 'Past, present and future' gives us nothing more than a means of describing the 'before after' relationship of events to our thought and talk. Can this be right?

If talk of the present or 'now' is merely a matter of saying that some events are simultaneous with this talking, are we not missing the fact that these events simultaneous with this talk-

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ing are indeed now – and not past or future? There are more problems: events, occurrences, happenings – events causing other events –all involve change. Does an understanding of time purely in terms of 'before and after' capture change?

Although, in recent years, there has been some publicity for Wittgenstein's poker – a controversy concerning whether, at a 1940s Cambridge Moral Sciences meeting, Wittgenstein, brandishing a poker, threatened Karl Popper – there is another, arguably more significant, Cambridge poker used to raise the 'change' puzzle. This poker is an example used by McTaggart, a few decades before the Wittgensteinian controversy.

Consider a poker: coloured red at one end and black at the other. Although it possesses these different colours, the possession does not carry the idea of its changing colour, merely that it has different colours. Similarly, that the death of Plato occurred after that of Socrates and before your reading of these words fails to capture the change we have in mind, when we speak of Plato's death once having been in the future but now being well in the past.

Consider now a black poker placed in a fire: it becomes red at one end because of the heat; still black and cold at the other. As the heat spreads, the black cold end will also turn to red hot – a change through time. The change is that the end that presently is cold and black, will become hot and red and, once hot and red, it is then true that it was cold and black. If such talk is nothing but talk of how the events stand in relation to the speaker, regarding 'before and after', then we have lost the idea of temporal change. Your reading of these words is after certain historic geological changes; timelessly and always after those changes. You are reading these words before the Sun burns out; timelessly and always before that burning event. Events do not change their position in the 'before and after' series; so it is difficult to see how that series can be all there is to talk of past, present and future – given that the poker changes colour. But what is that something more, if there are no conscious observers?

Time, and the idea of time, present many such troubles. McTaggart settled for time being an illusion. He argued that

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time does indeed essentially involve past, present and future, yet he, McTaggart, could make sense only of events standing in the 'before and after' relation. To say that time is an illusion immediately generates its own paradox. Even illusions seem to involve time; even if it is an illusion that the tortoise is moving, none the less there seem to be changes in that illusion, such that some experiences, as if the tortoise were at point A, are in the past, while at present the tortoise seems to be at point B.

2. 'I shot the Sheriff'

Now for a little puzzle about events and their timings.

Sheriff has been seriously wounded while trying to stop Bandit's raid on a remote ranch. He clings on to his faithful horse, which gallops him back to Little Rock (as faithful horses do); Bandit returns to the Bandit family in their mountain hideaway. Bandit boasts, 'I shot the sheriff', shows off his ill-gotten gains and initiates sustained celebrations. Back in Little Rock, beloved Sheriff is tended by the Little Rock doc, while a lynch mob sets off in search of Bandit. Sheriff, man of the law, makes clear his opposition to any lynching – 'I'm only shot, not killed. Bring Bandit back alive!' – but he (rightly) fears the worse, both for Bandit and for respect towards the law.



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Celebrations in the hideaway are so noisy and drunken that Mob, after a few days' riding, has little difficulty in finding the required bandit. Bandit is lynched. Mob returns to Little Rock, where the Little Rock doc still struggles to keep Sheriff alive. Doc does his best – but his best is not good enough (no doubt aided by Doc's propensity for gin). A few weeks later, Sheriff dies from his wounds, still displeased by the lynching. It is worth noting that we already have a puzzle: given his gin-soaked ineptness, should the doctor be held directly responsible for Sheriff's death rather than Bandit? Let us place that matter to oneside by making Doc a highly competent teetotal doctor. Bandit undoubtedly killed Sheriff; he died of the wounds from Bandit's gunshots.

When Bandit killed him may be thought to be baffling. Did he kill him when he shot him? That is highly implausible: Sheriff remained alive for weeks after the shooting and so there is no way he could have been killed by the shooting, at the time of the shooting, while yet going on living afterwards. Did Bandit kill him at the point when he died? That too seems implausible, for when Sheriff died, Bandit had been dead for a few weeks, lynched by Mob. How could a dead man, in these circumstances, kill? It is not as if Bandit's corpse swung round in the noose and gave Sheriff a fatal blow.

Where the killing took place may also be thought baffling. The shooting occurred at the ranch but Sheriff was never dead at the ranch. He died in Little Rock, yet Bandit never went into Little Rock. When Sheriff eventually died there, Bandit was but a corpse in a remote mountain range.

When and where does the killing take place? This type of question is no mere academic question: the law needs to decide about such matters. Assuming Bandit acted intentionally (and that various other conditions were met), Sheriff's killing is a murder but where and when did the murder take place? The location may be highly relevant, because where a law is broken usually determines the punishment: in some places murderers receive short so-called 'life' sentences (maybe ten years), yet elsewhere they meet with the death penalty (an extremely shortened life sentence). The time a crime occurred

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can also be highly relevant, for which punishment is meted out hangs on the law at the time of the offence and the age of the offender.

The right way of looking at this may be simply to remember that the law needs to decide about such matters. For practical reasons, we do just need to make decisions. It would be a mistake to think that, by investigating the world, we can rightly conclude that the murder occurred at precisely this point or that point. Perhaps the underlying mistake is to think that there must be precision when there is none.

The facts may be, for example, that a murder occurred in Virginia and in 1892 – but Virginia, and indeed 1892, are pretty big. No doubt we can be more precise about the murder but we should not assume that, in principle, we are always able to pinpoint a murder's time and location to a very high degree of specificity. A murder need not be space-time specific or have a precise location, akin to that of when and where a small alarm first went off.

Returning to Sheriff and Bandit, the correct description is as given in the tale. There was a shooting; it was fatal because some weeks later, in a different place, Sheriff died from his wounds. Legislators need to make decisions as to which laws should apply and, for the sake of justice, they need to ensure consistency. That is all that can be said. Or perhaps more can be – and should be – said…?

3. Paradox of Time-Taking

Here is another thought: I call it the 'Paradox of Time-Taking'. It is quite common to accept that, one way or another, what is happening now in the universe (at least at the level of planets and trees and clouds) has been caused by, or is in some way explained by, what happened in the universe just before. The thought is that the state and events of the universe a little earlier are sufficient – enough – to bring about the state and events of the universe now. Were they not sufficient, we should need to postulate something else to explain why the things that are happening now are, indeed, happening now. So, we have the picture of the universe in state C being suf-

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ficient to bring about the universe in state E. If that is so, there is a puzzle about why it takes time (and the particular time it takes) for E to come about, once C is present. Why is E not instantaneous with C? If there is a time lag, then it shows that something else must have been required, as well as C, to bring about E.

The puzzle that results from the above reasoning is as follows. We are inclined to think of the states and events of the universe as standing in causal chains, over time. Yet this simply cannot be so – for such a chain would have to be an instantaneous 'everything happening all at once'. A big bang, bigger, indeed, than any big bang dreamt of by the scientists.

That's philosophy for you! And we didn't even move out of our armchairs.

Peter Cave lectures for The Open Unversity. Some paragraphs above are extracts from Can A Robot Be Human? 33 Perplexing Philosophy Puzzles *(Oxford: Oneworld, 2007). The 'more that can be said' is indeed said in that work, where there are further discussions and further philosophical puzzles and paradoxes.*

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