

Where doesn't time go?

Notionally, 'time' and 'go' couldn't be more different. 'Go', with its many semantics, is one of man's earliest lexiconic companions. Before the dog 'says' woof, it 'goes' woof. It is terse and emotive in imperative form, and embodies agency, not just in phrases such as 'get up and go', but in the ability to order and allocate 'what goes where', including oneself. Time (Shakespeare's 'vengeful Wherligig'¹), by contrast, couldn't be more slippery. It isn't readily understood from an early age, is perhaps experienced logarithmically² and generally considered inalienable. When someone asks 'where does [the] time go?' (to an old friend, perhaps, or at the end of a long day) the futility of the juxtaposition is obvious; they are not asking what literally just happened, but more fittingly what didn't (and perhaps why). The analysis shifts. In moving to the unrealis, beyond the positivist's reach, 'time' and 'go' may more freely meet. Instead of the active 'did, does, and will', in this question one must now consider the past-subjunctive (where time didn't go, but could have), the counterfactual (everything that isn't the current state of affairs) and the impassable (where time will not go!). These will form the basis of my essay.

First the subjunctive; 'Where time didn't go'. What might've been is a centric question to the human experience, embodied in the terser 'what if?', and the emotive 'if only'. Here the agency implied in 'go' is unfortunate; it alludes to all of the instances, existences, and (i)realities where time did not go where we wanted it to, and suggests what we could've done differently. To Larkin we are closeted, 'tight shut' in the habits that prevented us from doing 'what we most want to do'³, in a reality which provides a mundane acquiescence in the face of, not only the high-school crush you were too nervous to ask-out, but the subsequent happy marriage and ideal life. Not to mention varyingly huge amounts of 'Bitcoin'. None of this would matter of-course, were it not for some concept of scarcity. That is that time doesn't 'go' (as in 'to run') forever, metaphysically at least. This gives rise to the notion of a 'waste of time'. That said, It's easy to be harsh on oneself in the subjunctive, after all its easy to take for granted the things we did 'right' and their implications. To Allan Bennet, exploring the mood offers 'a dizzying array of possibilities'⁴ which inform us of the implications of where time did go⁴. A World where Franz Ferdinand wasn't shot, for example, has consequences as far reaching as preclusion from this essay, being that he's the only 'Archduke' I've ever heard of.

To Dreamworks's Master Oogway "today is a gift, that is why it's called present."⁵, I suppose he means this in the sense that, unlike the immutable past, the present is 'gifted' to us to do as with, what we wish. He is wrong, however. The present exhibits path dependency, and so is inextricably informed by the past. Regret is the present embodiment of 'where time didn't go'. So is relief. In other words, the counterfactual is the present continuation of the past-subjunctive. (In that vein, this paragraph will be a continuation of the prior.) When we say 'we will go on holiday', the destination is imagined invariant, yourself and the destination both exist, only time is the critical dimension. How

is it so often what we plan is not the case? (Think, there are probably things you would rather be doing than reading this essay!) This, the allocative sense of 'go', presents quite the problem as an Economics student. In Economics, the 'allocation problem', is the embodiment of human agency; its solution the precursor to self-actualisation. Choose what you want to and that's what you'll most prefer, it says. To do so with time, one becomes oneself. Why, To Larkin then, do life's 'ranged joining and parting lines [...] reflect what something hidden from us chose',. That our time doesn't go where we want it has a strong consequentialism to it, and depressingly nullifying consequences for personal Liberty.

Of course, before casting out my degree the intellectual bathwater, it is important to question the day dream that is the counterfactual. You'd imagine that if time really were on a fixed path it didn't deviate from, there would be a reason. That if it couldn't go where we wanted, it would be for some mitigating circumstance. If the notion of path dependence defining where time doesn't go sounds terribly unscientific, that's because it is. Where time doesn't go (and by implication any causal statement about where it did) cannot pass Karl Popper's falsifiability criterion. - Given that you never asked, you cannot ever *know* if the high-school crush didn't date you because you were too nervous, or because she didn't like you anyway, or both. That's another thing about where time doesn't go; it never goes 'round again. It isn't repeatable. Hence, the rigidity of one's 'path dependency' is, by necessity, subjectively constructed. Advocating that you can eschew it, however, is the preserve of mustachioed German philosophers, who decided original sin was no longer a mitigating factor, and 'Swooshy ticks' which tell you to 'just do it...', not to mention countless self-help authors. When you do move from one 'joining and parting line'^3 to another, Bennet would call this a 'turning point; a point where history rattles over the points.'^4 It is at these points, at the juncture between where time does and doesn't go, that time stops, looks up, and asks for directions. It is such moments of suspense, that it can be said to have 'stood still.' Perhaps then there is some truth in what Master Oogway said.

As a slight aside, time is said to 'fly' when we're having fun. That's when, by contrast, it really goes. All of the unease and uncertainty of stopping at junctures is alleviated, as time, for whatever reason, chooses favorable courses. In a world of anxiety, fun is the train ploughing through a station, the tannoy proudly announcing 'stand clear, this train will not be stopping.'

By this point the answer to the impassible 'where time will not go', should be clear. As the past informs the present, so the present informs the future. All of the things that won't happen propagate out from the past junctures, like the branches of a probability tree, down routes time didn't go and become the impossible (save for some sub-atomic particle not mentioned here). As probability tells us, the chance something happened, given it didn't, is *zero*. If the present is taken to be our 3-d cross section moving through a 4-d object, as prevailing physics suggests^5, and go is the opposite of 'come', then in answer to the question 'where doesn't time go?', might be 'it doesn't'. Instead the present moves away from it. According to this view, everything that ever happened, 'where time

did go', still exists, only inaccessible to us, and it is this inaccessibility that makes it important to us. Important because, as mentioned, the past inextricably informs what we perceive, think, and indeed can achieve as our current options. This is what separates out, and gives precedence to, where time does go from where it doesn't; that in the face of almost infinite (varyingly good) alternates, only one occurs. Furthermore, despite the fact that, ex ante, (according to the probability tree [see^6]) the chance that anything did happen was almost negligibly small, that it did, and did so irretraceably, gives it near irrevocable significance.

Where doesn't time go? In the past, it didn't go one of many possible ways, with lasting ramifications because of it. In the present, it doesn't always go where we want it to, but given that what did happen doesn't go away informs the impassible. In conclusion, there can be no greater (metaphysical) band-wagon than the present. It may be possible to look out, but the band-wagon is what we're stuck with. At some point, everyone will fall off it, but always backward and to the side, like a diver from a boat, and always leaving a pair of shoes, or something from the pocket. The status-quo become irreplaceably passé, the band-wagons habits become habitué. There can be no greater memoriam than that. Non frustra vixi!

References

1. William Shakespeare, Twelfth Night, Circa 1602.
2. Dr Hannah Fry, 2018, Numberphile – Weber's Law available: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hHG8io5qIU8>
3. Phillip Larkin, Dockery and Son, The Whitsun Weddings, Faber and Faber 1964
4. Allan Bennet, The History Boys, 2004
5. Dreamworks, 'Kung foo Panda', Paramount pictures 2008
6. For an example of this argument, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m1o5EA-ALmo>