Time, Rationality, and Human Existence

HETA ALEKSANDRA GYLLING

Awareness of time is one facet of being human. Even if the experience of feeling and sensing time and its passage may vary both individually and culturally, the experience is still there in our personal history. People act in time and react to its linguistic manifestations differently. The meaning, content, and importance of past, present, and future and the sense and feeling of time's flow depend on our social and cultural setting as well as on our own personality. Hope, anticipation, fear, and happiness all influence our perception of time, slowing and quickening the pace of the continuous flow of time, where, in its due course, a still-unknown future becomes now and the now turns into an unchangeable past. But despite the fact that the concepts, meanings, and sensations of time are manifold, most of us—unlike the rest of the animal species—are influenced by the fact that not only is our living and flourishing shadowed by eventual decay and death, our lives and the lives of those dear to us may be cut short at any moment.

In our Western tradition, new notions of time and the need to measure it emerged in settings in which a sense of timelessness might be expected. In the sixth century, monks in Benedictine monasteries started dividing the day into hours in order to commit themselves to daily prayers rather than wasting time on secular activities. St. Benedict divided the daylight into eight canonical hours and thus made it possible to regulate daily activities. Counting hours and minutes as exactly as possible created a demand for mechanical clocks to help people keep track of passing time with more precision.[1] Throughout the centuries, this ability to observe time became increasingly important both in secular and spiritual life. The growing importance of salaried work made it essential to ensure the accuracy of timekeeping,[2] and—at least according to St. Augustine—salvation required the maximization of time spent in prayer. Time didn't and doesn't just vaguely frame our lives. It can be spent, used, and planned, and most importantly, it can be wasted in exactly measured units.

But what does it mean to "waste time"? The obvious answer of course is that because we have been allotted only one life each, we should use it well, filling it with experiences and positive memories. However, it should be kept in mind that there are philosophers who contemplate rather keenly the possibility of an extended wordly existence; I myself do not belong to this, in my opinion, rather curious group. Most, however, treasure a sense of the eternal in the idea of children, grandchildren, and so on.

But what does a well-spent shorter or longer life consist of? Is it justifiable to condemn a self-chosen life if it appears immoral, imprudent, or irrational to others? Does a well-spent life require a certain content depending on the person's age, gender, and social role, and does it exclude what common morality, that is, the Devlinian man in the jury box, finds immoral or irrational? The answer to these questions depends on our view of morality in general and the nature of the ideal

Cambridge Quarterly of Healthcare Ethics (2014), **23**, 17–21.

doi:10.1017/S096318011300039X

society. Our values, our appreciations, and our own tastes strongly influence what we personally consider to be worthwhile activities and what we see as the purpose of life—if there is any. What if the question of what makes a fulfilled life is futile?

Inherited Ideologies

For many centuries, it was taken for granted that most people have to work hard, idleness leading merely to moral decline and perdition. Rational, decent people are supposed to know what they should do with their lives, and if they don't, they have only themselves to blame when they have misused the divine gift given to them. Still today, we can find people who would firmly claim that the fate of someone like Oscar Wilde was only appropriate for someone who claimed that cultivated idleness is the only proper occupation for a man. Working hard during the day and resting at night is assumed to be the duty of the responsible citizens who form the backbone of a flourishing society.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the core ideals of both the Enlightenment and romanticism influenced the meaning of past and future time. Enlightenment thinking brought along a new pride and trust in human rationality and progress. The medieval philosophy of history saw the earthly life as merely an interlude in the human journey from paradise back to God's realm. This temporal life was seen only as a brief stay on earth, obviating the need for efforts to reform it. The main demand was to be born, to be obedient, to procreate, and to die in belief. The status quo of misery was to be accepted, and human attempts to alleviate the evils of the human condition were seen as instances of condemnable rebelliousness against the Almighty. But luckily, in my view, the Enlightenment thinkers, who optimistically saw the future as a smooth continuation of present and past, cast their eyes to a brighter future, open with unimaginable discoveries and inventions, which, one day, would make physical immortality possible.

This general optimism and keen interest in the future unfortunately wasn't universally accepted. The era of romanticism rejected future-oriented, reason-based thinking, and among others, Herder was ready to discard the value of scientific excellence and future oriented hopes and find the purpose of human existence from the past and biological cycles. For him, our history was a series of specializations, comparable to the life of other living organisms. In this historical development, past history became a determinant. People were to see themselves in the light of their more or less glorious past, as members of a nation, defined by its habits, traditions, and suitable environment. Demands for individual choice and man-made society were rejected; reason was replaced with feeling, emotion, and patriotic zeal. The message was much the same as we can find in writings by conservatives today:

> Political life is not a project of world improvement, or the reconstitution of human institutions on the pattern of any ideal model, but instead something much humbler, the office of government is to palliate the natural and unavoidable evils of human life, and to refrain from adding to them. . . . We are not, each of us, as our liberal culture encourages us to imagine, a limitless reservoir of possibilities, for whom the past is an irrelevance and the future an empty horizon.[3]

These ideas are not only memories from past times but can be found in social and political credos of proponents of conservatism whose main accusation against liberals is that belief in the value-neutral state is not only mistaken but dangerous. One of the government's functions should be the protection not of an imaginary neutrality but of common values, common morality:

> Contrary to neo-liberalism, a conservative government has good reasons to concern itself with the well-being and virtue of its subjects, since if these are not promoted liberal civil society will decay and loyalty to the liberal state will tend to wane. Conservatives must therefore resist the pressure for the political disestablishment of morality that is the common coinage of liberalism in both its libertarian and its revisionist egalitarian varieties.[4]

For conservatives, the past is valuable because, without knowing it, we cannot know what our shared community values are—and what they should be. They cast only furtive looks toward the future, because its proper direction can only be found in the past. Unlike them, liberals who lean on Enlightenment ideals seem to view life as something that offers us a possibility of voluntary decisionmaking and amelioration of the human condition—if only enough people are willing to engage in this endeavor.

On the other hand, the reliance on progress and increasing prosperity, together with technological and industrial development, introduced regulated work into our lives, such that only a few have a real opportunity to choose how they want to spend their time, whether they want to improve their quality of life by studying philosophy or by deepening their knowledge of Italian wines—or maybe both. Especially conservatives, who emphasize individual responsibility and identify the successful life with financial achievement, want people to take their lives seriously. For them, time is not something to be lightly disposed of but rather a role, connected with time schedules, variation being allowed only up to the limits of "reasonableness" and suitability. As Kant noted:

> Which of these natural perfections may be preferable, and in what proportions, in comparison with one another, it may be man's duty to himself to make them his aim, are matters left to one's own rational reflection upon his desire for a certain mode of life, and his evaluation of the powers requisite for it. This reflection and evaluation are necessary in order to choose what his mode of life should be, e.g. handicraft, commerce, or a learned profession. For apart from the necessity of self-preservation man owes it to himself to be a useful member of the world because being one belongs also to the worth of the humanity in his own person, which he should not degrade.[5]

This requirement did not, of course, apply to women.

But how do those in favor of perfectionism know what really is a good life for each of us? How should we spend our time in order to achieve it? Is it living a life in modest, so-called natural (i.e., very uncomfortable) circumstances, surrounded by one's extended family, or is it a life of consumption in quest of rejuvenation—with the help of either plastic surgery or spare parts from one's clones?

Of course, John Stuart Mill pointed out that we do have some more and some less valuable pleasures. But what Mill didn't claim was that though he might be justified in suggesting better options for those in obvious need of them, he would not be justified in trying to force these choices on others. As long as people abstain from harming one another, they should be let to choose—and not only from a pile of historically inherited roles, traditionally acceptable pastimes, and shared values. True liberals can, without pangs of conscience, spend their time in what others would consider meaningless activities or trivial pursuits.

On the other hand, conservatives have no problems knowing how they are to divide their time. Looking and listening to traditions and traditional roles show them the proper ingredients of a good and fulfilling life. Family roles—such as acting as somebody's father, mother, aunt, cousin, and godfather—prescribe certain behavior, requiring part of one's time. The liberal rejection of these community-molded social roles is to be condemned if social well-being is to be taken seriously. As David Conway points out when discussing the problem of increasing crime rates:

> One major factor responsible for the collapse of the two-parent family . . . has undoubtedly been the growth of state welfare. For it has enabled young women, without any appreciable reduction in living standards, to have and raise children without needing to be maintained by the fathers of these children. The rise of the welfare state would appear to have removed previously powerful economic disincentives for their doing so, and as a result created an environment conducive to criminality.[6]

According to Conway, good and caring people don't reject their roles, and, as is clearly visible from several authors' texts, conservatives tend to see men's and women's roles as essentially different.

In addition to family roles, people have other roles; the number of these roles rather depends on how socially oriented they are. They may spend time as scout leaders, football coaches, or surrogate mothers. There is nothing wrong with these activities as such, but if they are not really freely chosen by the individual, the situation is less than satisfactory. Of course, this is true only for a liberal individualist, not for a conservative. The conservative, traditional way of life can easily—with the help of manipulation or gentle persuasion—lead women to knitting and baking cakes when their natural inclination might lie more in sports and repair work.

This difference seen between men's and women's roles in life explains one curiosity in conservative thinking. One of their favorite slogans seems to be to emphasize the importance of earning and deserving what you need and get. But this duty to earn one's own living does not necessarily hold for both women and men, considering the ease with which wealthy men adjust to a family model in which the woman's main activities seem to consist of lunching, shopping, and gossiping with her peers. Most of them again would personally find the idea of monetary dependence degrading.

The difference between the sexes was vigorously defended by Jean-Jacques Rousseau. According to him, women are weak and passive, and men are active and strong; hence it is only natural that their roles in life and educative preparation for it should differ. Women will never become masters of their own lives

and times, and this has to be taught to them already when young. According to Rousseau, responsible educators

> do not leave them [women] for a moment without restraint. Train them to break off their games and return to their other occupations without a murmur. Habit is all that is needed, as you have nature on your side. This habitual restraint produces a docility which woman requires all her life long, for she will always be in subjection to a man, or to man's judgement, and she will never be free to set her own opinion above his.[7]

In the spirit of romanticism, Rousseau believed that women represent feelings, emotions, and morality and that they should not waste their time in scientific reading. The female brain simply wasn't capable of dealing with abstract thinking. In reference to this, Rousseau quotes the highly respectable Lord Chesterfield's comment stating that "women are only children of a larger growth." Rationality and serious pastimes should be reserved for those with appropriate capabilities, that is, adult Western men.

In every culture people get used to different views on what are seen as rational ways of using one's time. For instance, in the agrarian Finnish past, the idea of napping in the summer sun, being busy doing nothing, was considered not only bad manners but a serious case of moral irresponsibility. In the countryside, one was supposed to toil from dawn till dusk, and nobody suggested at the time—unlike women's magazines do today—that one should invest some time in oneself, relax, and just do what one wants. But although leisure and self-pampering have become an acceptable part of one's life, they are still mainly seen as instrumentally valuable in the higher pursuit of careers and the eagerness to raise a family and pass on one's genes. But what if *this* is what should be seen as a waste of time?

Notes

1. Turetzky P. *Time*. London: Routledge; 1998, at 68.
2. Landes DS. *Revolution in Time: Clocks and the Making of the Modern World*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press; 1983, at 72–6.
3. Gray J. *Beyond the New Right: Markets, Government and the Common Environment*. London: Routledge; 1993, at 4.
4. See note 3, Gray 1993, at 50–1.
5. Kant I. Metaphysics of morals. In: *Kant, Ethical Philosophy*. 2nd ed. Indianapolis: Hackett; 1994, at 109–10.
6. Conway D. *Classical Liberalism: The Unvanquished Ideal*. London: MacMillan; 1995, at 137.
7. Rousseau JJ. *Emile*. CITY: PUB; 1762, Book V, at 1299.