

The Concept of Time: Physics and Perception

Post by “Kalosyni” of December 16, 2022 at 8:12 PM

On the ethical side of things, from the Letter to Menoeceus, we have this about time:

"And just as with food he does not seek simply the larger share and nothing else, but rather the most pleasant, so he seeks to enjoy not the longest period of time, but the most pleasant."

And also for Epicurus, and Epicureans, understanding "the nature of things" was also important. We now have a much more complex creation of time, compared to the ancient Greek sundial. I came across this interesting article, about the science of atomic clocks:

<https://www.npr.org/2022/12/16/113...-clocks-society>

---Not only the physics of time, but also [the perception of time](#) and how our consciousness experiences it.

---That old cliché: "So many books, so little time" and also the busy-ness of life and [making peace with "time"](#).

Post by “Cassius” of December 16, 2022 at 9:54 PM

Also there is this that is probably related:

VS14. We are born once and cannot be born twice, but for all time must be no more. But you, who are not master of tomorrow, postpone your happiness. Life is wasted in procrastination, and each one of us dies while occupied.

Post by “Cassius” of December 17, 2022 at 12:24 AM

Letter to Herodotus:

72] Moreover, you must firmly grasp this point as well; we must not look for time, as we do for all other things which we look for in an object, by referring them to the general conceptions

which we perceive in our own minds, but we must take the direct intuition, in accordance with which we speak of "a long time" or "a short time," and examine it, applying our intuition to time as we do to other things. Neither must we search for expressions as likely to be better, but employ just those which are in common use about it.

Nor again must we predicate of time anything else as having the same essential nature as this special perception, as some people do, but we must turn our thoughts particularly to that only with which we associate this peculiar perception and by which we measure it.

[73] For indeed this requires no demonstration, but only reflection, to show that it is with days and nights and their divisions that we associate it and likewise also with internal feelings or absence of feeling, and with movements and states of rest; in connection with these last again we think of this very perception as a peculiar kind of accident, and in virtue of this we call it time.

Post by "Cassius" of December 17, 2022 at 12:33 AM

I think as usual Epicurus is getting to what is really important for us to understand about time as a natural phenomena of human life, as opposed to how we can twist ourselves into pretzels of logic or mysticism trying to dissect and define time.

Probably that segment could be made a lot more clear to us by approaching it in that manner and looking more closely at the Greek to see exactly what he is contrasting his own view against.

Why should we NOT look to time as a "general conception?" (Is that or is that not referring to an anticipation?)

What other possible "predicates" should we avoid attaching to time, and who is doing that and why?

And again in the last sentence we have use of "accident" which might be better thought of as "incident" or "event" (which removes the 'chance' connotation but still considers time as a "quality") rather than an eternal unchanging attribute like atoms have.

Post by "Cassius" of December 17, 2022 at 12:43 AM

And to add to the mix, Lucretius, in the Brown edition, which uses "events" rather than exclusively "accidents" -

449] All other things you'll find essential conjuncts, or else the events or accidents of these. I call essential conjunct what's so joined to a thing that it cannot, without fatal violence, be forced or parted from it; is weight to stones, to fire heat, moisture to the Sea, touch to all bodies, and not to be touched essential is to void. But, on the contrary, Bondage, Liberty, Riches, Poverty, War, Concord, or the like, which not affect the nature of the thing, but when they come or go, the thing remains entire; these, as it is fit we should, we call Events. Time, likewise, of itself is nothing; our sense collects from things themselves what has been done long since, the thing that present is, and what's to come. For no one, we must own, ever thought of Time distinct from things in motion or at rest.

[464] For when the poets sing of Helen's rape, or of the Trojan State subdued by war, we must not say that these things do exist now in themselves, since Time, irrevocably past, has long since swept away that race of men that were the cause of those events; for every act is either properly the event of things, or of the places where those things are done. Further, if things were not of matter formed, were there no place or space where things might act, the fire that burned in Paris' heart, blown up by love of Helen's beauty, had never raised the famous contests of a cruel war; nor had the wooden horse set Troy on fire, discharging from his belly in the night the armed Greeks: from whence you plainly see that actions do not of themselves subsist, as bodies do, nor are in nature such as is a void, but rather are more justly called the events of body, and of space, where things are carried on.

Post by "Cassius" of December 17, 2022 at 12:48 AM

Quite possibly the take-home point is that time has no existence of its own, which further distinguishes Epicurus' from the Platonic "ideal / forms " viewpoint. (That observation probably applies to Aristotle's 'essences' too if Frances Wright's remarks about Aristotle are correct.):

Time, likewise, of itself is nothing; our sense collects from things themselves what has been done long since, the thing that present is, and what's to come. For no one, we must own, ever thought of Time distinct from things in motion or at rest.

...

...from whence you plainly see that actions do not of themselves subsist, as bodies do, nor are in nature such as is a void, but rather are more justly called the events of body, and of space, where things are carried on.

Are there other implications to this observation beyond something like "we can measure time by whatever units make sense to us to choose?".

Or is there something else, or more...? Maybe that there is nothing magic or divine or fortune-telling about the passing of x hours or x days or x years?

Or that length of time (age?) is not an absolute standard or appropriate way to look at life and determine whether it has been lived fully, as is closer to the thought with which Kalosyni started the thread?