

SELF OR THE WORLD¹

‘Wake up’ – with the sound of these words, uttered by his girlfriend, starts Nyles’ morning in the film *Palm Springs*, released in 2021. That and every next morning, to be precise, as the film protagonist has been trapped in a time-loop on a Californian wedding. Each time he falls asleep, no matter when and where, he wakes up in the same bed in the same morning, accompanied by the same girl. Terrifying as it may seem, the situation tends to be not as depressive for Nyles. The never-ending repetition of the wedding day in the town Palm Springs gives him an opportunity to test (social) reality around him to its maximal limits. He can repeat interactions with the same people and check their responses in various scenarios, ruin the party with inappropriate jokes without consequence (as long as he manages to get away until the end of the day), or simply enjoy each morning drinking beer in a pool.

However, with the plot unfolding, serious doubts arise, not only because Sarah, a female protagonist who joins Nyles in the time-loop, confronts him with existential questions. Unlike Sarah and Nyles, aware of the situation they have fallen into and keeping memories of previous ‘days’, people around them perpetually repeat the same words, gestures, actions, without knowledge of the state of affairs. They resemble robots or animated puppets, programmed to perform a limited set of activities. A viewer might then ask about their status – are they real? Do they have real memories? If they do not live in the time-loop, what does their next day look like? Which version of the wedding party (devoid of any follow-up and ever-repeating for Nyles and Sarah) does the next day follow? Which future (of all possible ones) would enter Nyles and Sarah if they managed to escape the time-loop?

What speaks in favor of the interpretation in line with which others are no real persons is the high repeatability of their behavior, lack of memories concerning previous versions of the day, and the following manipulability of their actions. They are not only deluded as to the condition they are in (as one could try to reply with such a Cartesian scenario) but also devoid of persons’ typical features such as (at least partially) free agency and reflectivity, which is shown by the fact that interactions with them can be endlessly repeated and checked like in an algorithm, without their knowledge. However, what if everybody at the wedding has fallen into the time-loop? And what – on the contrary – if nobody in fact has? Would this day still endlessly repeat, yet this time without any mind to observe next iterations? Could the skepticism about others’ personhood be maintained? And what if, in fact, time *does* repeat? Are *we* conscious subjects?

Thus, the status of cognizing minds – all minds – seems the first concern resulting from the possibility of time travels. The second problem (expressed above in questions about potential futures after the time-trapped wedding day) is the character of non-conscious reality. How can

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the apparently persistent sequence of events ordered in time be sustained when time travels are possible and, in fact, there is *no* time²? Both subjects and objects seem endangered by its non-existence. Let me discuss it briefly as two hypotheses in the following paragraphs. I will start with objects (and the world).

No Order in The World

The heart of Kurt Gödel's argumentation for the possibility of time travels and, in consequence, against the reality of time, as presented in (Gödel, 1949) and (Yourgrau, 2005, p. 152-154), is the refutation of the so-called A-series, just like in the presumably most famous argument against time by J.M.E. McTaggart (1908). While the alternative B-series of time (in McTaggart's view logically dependent on A-series as the condition of its temporality) is based on fixed relations of being earlier or later between events, A-series' character is revealed in constant passing from future – through present – to past (Loux, 2006). 'Now' as a temporal point is continuously in motion.

Where for McTaggart the A-series entails attribution of mutually exclusive predicates to the same event in time and thus entails contradiction, Gödel argues that the special relativity theory being true rules out the existence of a privileged (and independent of a frame of reference) time point, universal 'now'. Intuitive time of everyday existence disappears, a spectacular instance of which is the possibility of time travels (Gödel, 1949). Leaving aside a more comprehensive presentation of Gödel's argument as laying outside the scope of these considerations (the contest question required *assuming that* time does not exist), I would like to focus on phenomenological aspects of non-existence of time³.

First, following the Kantian tradition of thinking about time as a precondition or form of a phenomenal world, it is worth looking closer at the role it plays in our perceptions. Time, as the inner sense (next to the outer sense, space), allows for organizing experience of outside objects and inner intuitions, so that they can be perceived by a cognizing subject (Kant, 1998, p. 174-177 A22/B36-A26/B42; p. 180-181 A33/B49-A34/B51). However, it must be noted, it does not need to entail ascribing to Kant a form of phenomenalism understood as constructing a world based entirely on sense impressions – as a matter of fact leaving the door open to a realist interpretation of the first *Critique* (cf. Sellars, 1968, p. 48-50; Heidemann, 2021). In accordance with Kant's own understanding of his doctrine, one may add, since he openly identifies transcendental idealism with the so-called empirical realism (Kant, 1998, p. 426-427 A369-A372). At the same time, the role of time and space (together with categories

² Of course, the possibility of time travels and the non-existence of time can be *prima facie* treated as two separate hypotheses. Here, however, in accordance with the contest's question, they are taken as logically interrelated.

³ According to Gödel's reasoning, the possibility of time travels suffices to demonstrate the non-existence of time. It should be emphasized that his claim aims at proving time's unreality, not simply its non-standard structure. Thus, the film plot discussed above suffices to cast doubt on the existence of time as well.

introduced in *Transcendental Analytics*) is not solely reduced to conditioning the actual experience. What they facilitate, as Kant many times repeats, is all *possible* experience. It is then fully legitimate to call time and space the forms of the world (as representation), not only of cognition (Poręba, 2014, p. 101-102)⁴.

If time does not exist, then, apparently, the world seems to lose its form. What does it mean? A hint might be provided by the words of Kant:

‘If cinnabar were now red, now black, now light, now heavy, if a human being were now changed into this animal shape, now into that one, if on the longest day the land were covered now with fruits, now with ice and snow, then my empirical imagination would never even get the opportunity to think of heavy cinnabar on the occasion of the representation of the color red; or if a certain word were attributed now to this thing, now to that, or if one and the same thing were sometimes called this, sometimes that, without the governance of a certain rule to which the appearances are already subjected in themselves, then no empirical synthesis of reproduction could take place.’ (Kant 1998, p. 229 A100-A101)

The world in this vision is no longer a structured whole, where objects (as phenomena) exist in time and space, interact with each other due to, among others, causality, and thus as *res extensa* (to use the Cartesian term) compose a calculable and predictable unity. Without time, through which objects, thoughts, events are organized as subsequent or simultaneous, they cease to relate to each other, that is, they cease to be one reality. That this problem is not an internal difficulty of Kant’s theory⁵ (which understands time as a form of pure intuition determining the structure of empirical reality via the schematism of the categories) can be seen in another famous paragraph from the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Refutation of Idealism, as well as in some other claims made by Kant. Conclusions he reaches there are to a big extent independent of his earlier assumptions.

In short, the Refutation of Idealism presents a transcendental argument for the existence of outside world by showing that it is necessarily presupposed by the (expectation of reliable) measurements of time, otherwise no frame of reference for such a procedure would be

⁴ In Marcin Poręba’s words, who reads the first *Critique* in such a realistic spirit, ‘(...) space and time in Kant’s understanding are not merely forms of perception in the local sense of the word, i.e. forms that organize, as it were, individual appearances or scenes. For these forms are meant to apply to all objects of possible experience (phenomena), i.e., not only those that we actually perceive at a given moment, but also those that we could perceive (...).’ (Poręba, 2014, p. 101)

⁵ One could obviously posit another theory of time. However, for two other most well-known conceptions, the one proposed by Newton and the one by Leibniz (where, respectively, time and space are both a kind of *χώρα* independent of objects or are made up by the relations between them), the consequence of non-existence of time for the world appears only more burning.

provided (cf. Stern, 2021 for a very clear description of that reasoning). Apart from that, however, Kant seems to be also arguing that valid measurements of space require time:

‘The measurement of a space (as apprehension) is at the same time the description of it, thus *an objective movement in the imagination and a progression*; by contrast, the comprehension of multiplicity in the unity not of thought but of intuition, hence the comprehension in one moment of that which is successively apprehended, is a regression, which in turn cancels *the time-condition in the progression* of the imagination and makes simultaneity intuitable’ (Kant, 2002, p. 142, AA 5: 258-259, italics mine).

and ‘That time is expressed by a line (which is however space) and space through a time (the distance travelled in an hour) is a schematism of the concept of the understanding.’ (Kant, 2005, p. 395, AA 18: 687). All spatial scales can be expressed with a reference to different metrics, at the end of the day, however, the search for more primitive terms describing these very measures demands employing temporal intervals (such as expressing distance by time needed to walk it). As Poręba notes, contemporary physics provides a very good candidate for such a temporal benchmark – light speed. ‘It allows a universal expression of time by space (for example, one light-meter is the time it takes light to travel one meter) and space by time (one light-second is the distance light travels in one second).’ (Poręba, 2014, p. 112). Consequently, both space is said to determine time, and the other way round – time can be said to determine space.

The resulting interrelation between time and space implies that disappearance of any of them will suffice for world’s (understood as structured whole of things or events) dissolution. Synthesis of possible experience proves then impossible. This however does not have to mean that Kant’s transcendental argument, according to which the empirical reality of a coherent world presupposes (as its necessary conditions) the validity of forms of experience or categories, holds irrefutable. Quentin Meillassoux offers an interesting reply to it. He argues that while the answer given by Kant to Hume’s problem of causation remains within the same realm as the question formulated by the Scottish philosopher (unlike Popper’s solution, which in Meillassoux’s view confuses the ontological order with the epistemological), it is based on an unjustified premise. According to Meillassoux, Kant illegitimately assumes that the conditions of regular appearances in nature (and thus, science) and a perceiving, empirical consciousness are the same (Meillassoux, 2015, p. 24-31). As Strawson has it: ‘He (Kant - MP) is concerned (...) with the general conditions of the employment of concepts, of the recognition of the particular contents of experience as having some general character; and he regards these conditions as being at the same time the fundamental conditions of the possibility of ordinary or empirical self-consciousness’ (Strawson, 1966, p. 26).

The crucial category here, causation, is for Kant at the same time a precondition for the objective temporal order of appearances (which cannot be based only on subjective order of representations), according to the argumentation from the Second Analogy. In this sense, time is epistemically determined by causal laws (cf. Guyer, 1987, p. 242-248)⁶.

Thus, the Kantian scenario, as Meillassoux sees it, implies that a causally and temporally unstructured, unsynthesized world would fall into imperceptible chaos, incognizable for the empirical self, being itself its element:

‘But since every form of temporal continuity would come to be broken, I myself could not subsist, in the form of a self-consciousness capable of witnessing the spectacle of this frightening desolation, for my own memory would disappear in its turn as soon as it emerged. Everything would be reduced to the punctual and perpetually amnesiac intuition of a point of chaos without density and without relation to its past.’ (Meillassoux, 2015, p. 30)

However, as one could reply, the subjective notion of time essentially employing our memory (grasped in the form of McTaggart's A-series) still has not been fully reduced to the objective time stemming from the application of the principle of causality to the outer appearances (cf. Falkenburg & Schiemann, 2016). And indeed, Meillassoux seems to be following that proviso, when he argues that the above described scenario is not the only possible. In two other types of ‘chaotic’ worlds which he describes, the irregularities would not be big enough to rule out the existence of consciousness. We could freely imagine universes where the non-existence of laws of nature would cause some disturbances to science, limiting its applicability and explanatory/predictive powers (Type-1 worlds, as he calls them) or even completely precluding its existence (Type-2), yet human subjectivity would survive (Meillassoux, 2015, p. 31-41). That suggests that without time (understood as a factor organizing objects of possible experience – and the world) a conscious self could possibly exist, even though the world would not be fully structured and could not be described as an orderly arranged whole.

Having that in mind, the first consequence of the non-existence of time can be formulated. The world without time (intuitive flux of ‘now’) could possibly be still in existence, yet deprived of order. At the same time, the (possible) presence of a conscious self would be maintained. Quite differently looks the alternative consequence.

⁶ ‘So the determination of the temporal order of the represented states must be grounded on something other than *either* the order of the representations (...) *or* the order of the objective states themselves. (...) This Kant takes to imply that, since necessity is required, there must be a pure concept of understanding, and that it must be that of “*the relation of cause and effect*” (B 234)’ (Guyer, 1987, p. 244, 246).

No Self

If we look closer at the thesis formulated by Gödel, affirming the possibility of time travels, which leads necessarily to the non-existence of time, one should ask: *who travels?* First, let us imagine that I (or any other individual) can travel in time. Possibly, I could participate in events from the distant past or future, but what if I tried to reexperience events from my own life? It does not appear problematic as long as I do not try to imagine my presence by events such as my own birth. Would I reappear in the world, or simply exist in two “copies”? The former would contradict the reality of time travels. The latter, in turn, would cancel the reality of self. If in a time travel I can meet myself and look upon (or even interact with) myself from outside, maybe it is not me who travels. Who is it, then?

Again in reference to the transcendental tradition, the traveling self could be called a transcendental ego. This time, however, more in the Husserlian sense than in the Kantian (designating the transcendental unity of apperception):

‘The "I" which transforms the world into mere phenomenon is, in so doing, aware of itself as transforming the world and cannot be subjected to the same transformation. (...) this "I" is completely devoid of any content which could be studied or explicated. It is completely indescribable, being no more than a pure ego’ (Schmitt, 1959, p. 240)

By very definition, such a transcendental ego would be something different than an empirical self, instantiated in our everyday experience. It would constitute conditions of the phenomenal world’s reality, not being itself its part. And because the time, at least as long as being perceived (in case someone defended its strictly substantialist, Newtonian vision – or similarly posited empty time (cf. Allison, 2004, p. 372-373)) arranges the succession of objects or events *in* the world, let them be physical or mental, the latter’s (viz., world’s) conditions of validity appear to stay beyond its domain. Otherwise, to argue again in a Kantian manner, we would need a time of a higher order (cf. Kant 1998, p. 508-509 A487/B515).

Consequently, the transcendental ego’s perspective would contain an element of timelessness, rendering it close to how St. Augustine imagined the divine, all-encompassing standpoint. For if all experience can (at least locally) be ever-repeated and tested towards its consequences, so that nothing really *new* occurs, it ceases to provide a truly fresh insight into empirical reality, constituting an outside, frozen bird’s eye instead. The quasi-divine character of that perspective would not have to mean that it is God who travels in time. Moreover, in a sense, there would be no travel at all. The transcendental ego would be reducible to the structure of the world, being a kind of its scaffolding. As Poręba emphasizes, from the truly

transcendental perspective there is neither any relativity nor a contingently distinguished frame of reference. Such a Parmenidean world would be untranslatable to our worldview (Poręba, 2014, p. 56-57)⁷.

This world would have nothing chaotic at all. It would be a timeless vision, lacking any relativity or individual perspective. Thus, also lacking a conscious subject, as incapable of a fully objective, external perspective “from nowhere”. Here, in this proposition, the world is saved, yet at the cost of the empirical subject’s disappearance. The remaining transcendental ego is rather the world (its structure) than the self. What we are left with is a timeless world without a conscious empirical subject, unlike in the first scenario, where the non-existence of time entails the inevitability of chaos after the collapse of the time-based synthesis of experience. There, however, the self survives.

It is beyond the scope of this short sketch to affirm one of the alternatives and dismiss the other. Whether we see the timeless Gödelian universe as an unstructured chaos perceived by a time-traveling individual or as a static and perfectly non-relative whole without any subjectivity might depend on some deeper philosophical intuitions. Their investigation, however, must be carried on elsewhere (not to say elsewhere). As a concluding remark, let me say that in a timeless universe either the very world itself or a conscious subject can be maintained. To save them both, Nyles and Sarah have nothing else but to leave the wedding in Palm Springs as quickly as they can.

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⁷ ‘From the divine point of view, even if it takes the "secularized" form of the transcendental attitude, variability becomes pure extension, so to speak: different states, different variants of a certain structure or property can be seen from it as equally given, actualized, if not as a matter of fact, then at least in some broader space of possibilities.’ (Poręba, 2014, p. 56-57)

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