

## SELF OR THE WORLD

‘Wake up’ – with the sound of these words, uttered by his girlfriend, starts Nyles’ morning in the recently directed film *Palm Springs*. 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, how 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 of 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 have 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 the apparently persistent sequence of events ordered in time be sustained when time travels are possible and, in fact, there is *no* time<sup>1</sup>? 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, 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

---

<sup>1</sup> 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.

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 move.

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 time<sup>2</sup>.

First, following the Kantian tradition of thinking about time as a precondition or form of phenomenal world, it is worth to look closer on the role it plays in our perceptions. Time, as the inner sense (next to the external sense, space), allows for organizing experience of outside objects and inside intuitions, so that they can be perceived by a cognizing subject (Kant, 1998). Marcin Poręba, reading Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* in a rather realistic spirit, emphasizes that the role of time and space (together with categories 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*. Thus, it is fully legitimate to call time and space the forms of world (as representation), not only of cognition (Poręba, 2014, 101-102).

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, 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 theory<sup>3</sup> (which assumes that time is a form of cognition / world as representation) can be seen in remarks complementing

---

<sup>2</sup> 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.

<sup>3</sup> 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.

another famous paragraph from the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Refutation of Idealism. Conclusions reached there by Kant are to a big extent independent of his earlier assumptions.

In short (a very good description may be found in (Poręba, 2014, 110-111)), apart from showing that reliable measurements of time require existence of the outside world, otherwise no frame of reference for such a procedure would be provided, the transcendental philosopher also argues that measurements of space require time as well. 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 (Poręba, 2014, 111-113). Consequently, both space determines time, and the other way round – time determines space (Kant, 1987, 116).

Moreover, this argumentation tends to be independent of Kant's earlier assumptions. The resulting interrelation between time and space means 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 existence of the world necessarily proves the existence of forms of experience or categories, holds valid. 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 is based on a confusion of 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 perceiving consciousness are the same. Without causation (but the same could be equally said about time<sup>4</sup>), no synthesis of experience would be possible, as the world (together with a cognizing subject as its part) would slip into imperceptible chaos (Meillassoux, 2015, 24-31).

However, Meillassoux replies, this is only one of possible scenarios. In two other types of a 'chaotic' world, the irregularities would not be big enough to rule out the existence of consciousness. We could imagine worlds where the non-existence of laws of nature would cause some disturbances to science, presumably even denying its possibility, yet conscious life would survive (Meillassoux, 2015, 31-41). Again, it is worth to repeat that Meillassoux's remarks seem fit for considerations about time as well. That means that without time (understood as a factor structuring objects of possible experience – and the world) a conscious subject could exist, even though the world would not be fully structured and could not be described as an orderly organized 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 presence (or at least its possibility) of a conscious self would be maintained. Quite differently looks the alternative consequence.

## 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

---

<sup>4</sup> Both Meillassoux (2015, 28, 30) and Poręba (2014, 48-49) emphasize the necessary link between causation and time in the *Critique of Pure Reason*.

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 travelling self could be called a transcendental ego. By very definition, it would be something different than an empirical self, instantiated in our everyday experience. The transcendental ego would constitute conditions of phenomenal world’s reality, not being itself its part. Its perspective would contain an element of timelessness, rendering it close to how St. Augustine imagined the divine perspective. It 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 parmenidesian world would be untranslatable to our worldview (Poręba, 2014, 56-57).

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 a cost of 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 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-travelling 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.

#### References:

- Gödel, K. (1949). ‘An Example of a New Type of Cosmological Solutions of Einstein’s Field Equations of Gravitation’, *Reviews of Modern Physics*, 21(3), 447-450.
- Kant, I. (1987). *Critique of Judgement*, trans. W.S. Pluhar, with a foreword by M.J. Gregor. Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company.
- Kant, I. (1998). *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. P. Guyer, A.W. Wood. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Loux, M.J. (2006). ‘The Nature of Time’. In: M.J. Loux, *Metaphysics A Contemporary Introduction*, 205-229. New York: Routledge.
- McTaggart, J.M.E. (1908). ‘The Unreality of Time’, *Mind*, 17(68), 457-474.
- Meillassoux, Q. (2015). ‘Science-Fiction and Extro-Science Fiction’ in Q. Meillassoux, *Science-Fiction and Extro-Science Fiction followed by ‘The Billiard Ball’ by Isaac Asimov*, trans. A. Edlebi. Minneapolis: Univocal Publishing.
- Poręba, M. (2014). *Granice względności. Opis metafizyczny*. Warsaw: PWN SA, Fundacja na Rzecz Myślenia.

Yourgrau, P. (2005). *A World Without Time: The Forgotten Legacy of Gödel and Einstein*. New York: Basic Books.