Wittgensteinian Considerations about Time

I) *Time and Conceptual Chaos*

Philosophical puzzles may be classified from different points of view, one being, I suggest, their degree of difficulty. From this perspective, time strikes us as a philosophically frightening subject. Indeed when for the first time we approach the subject and try to grasp its essence or nature, we can't help shuddering. A way of showing that time does have a highly complex character is to point to the huge variety of metaphors, puzzles and theories it has given rise to. This in turn would explain why the views about time advocated by classical philosophers may be both attractive and mutually incompatible. The diversity of conceptions and theses produced in connection with time is indeed amazing. The idea of time has been understood as directly got from experience, but also as a construct or as pointing to something unreal, to a mere illusion; time has been visualized as a special kind of fluid, a sort of container in which objects lie, as an epistemological structure and therefore as something mental in character, and so on. Thus it is understandable that in a first approach we should feel completely lost as to how to take it and what to say about it. Let us recall the much quoted passage by St. Augustine: "What, then, is time? If no one asks me, I know: if I wish to explain it to one that asketh, I know not".[1] This is unmistakably a clear sign that the notion of time is a marvelous source of philosophical confusion.

In this essay I shall assume that any philosophical theory, regardless of its subject matter, is the outcome of a confusion, of a misunderstanding. Indeed, the fact that no universal agreement with respect to a particular philosophical topic has been reached reveals that so far it has turned out impossible to state clearly the rules of use for the term in question. The general situation may be presented as follows: the more complex are the rules of use of a given term, the easier it is to privilege one particular aspect of the relevant concept and, accordingly, the more will philosophical theories proliferate, all of them being of course mutually incompatible. Metaphors concerning time privilege one particular aspect of the concept and by employing them speakers show which particular aspect strikes them as the most representative, as the decisive one. Thus if we speak of time as a river, we may be willing to emphasize the continuous character of our temporal measurements or perhaps the idea that with respect to temporal series it makes no sense to point to a beginning or to an end. Nevertheless, it should be clear that no image or metaphor, however fortunate, is tantamount to a conceptual elucidation. They are rather an easy linguistic mechanism to grasp or express in a plastic way a sector of the total

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[1] St. Augustine, *Confessions*, Book XI, sects. X-XXXI, in *The Philosophy of Time*. Edited by Richard M. Gale (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1968) p. 40.

meaning of a term. On the other hand, it is obvious that what many philosophers do (in particular those more influenced by the natural sciences), *i.e.*, to try to explain time by having recourse to the latest and most sophisticated scientific theory (*e.g.*, a physical one), is from a methodological point of view utterly unacceptable.[2] It is evident that in order to solve the usual puzzles connected with "time" theories like those are, in spite of their mathematical and technical structure, simply useless since they presuppose an intuitive or natural concept of time ("natural" in the sense of "belonging" to natural language), a concept elaborated prior to the concept constructed by, for instance, physicists. Therefore, the latter can be of no help for the clarification of the former.

The kind of elucidation we strive after springs not from a theory, however formalized it might be, but from an analysis and this can only consist of an examination of the use of the term, that is, of its actual application. The description of its application is what enables us to grasp its **grammar** and through this its "essence" or nature. Seen in this way, the original feeling of intellectual terror mentioned above now appears to us understandable but basically unfounded. In Wittgensteinian terms, the diagnosis is rather simple but nonetheless hits the target: it is the lack of a perspicuous representation of the grammar of the word 'time' (and of words that logically derive from it) which lies at the bottom of all the philosophical knots that trouble us. In other words, the rules of grammar for 'time' form a very complex structure, which cannot easily be visualized or grasped as a whole. That is why the concept of time is so easy to misunderstand. It is quite obvious that the grammar of 'time' is much more complicated than that of, say, 'table' and, accordingly, it is much easier to explain what tables are than to explain what time is. Incidentally, this shows that what are usually taken as "substantial" difficulties do get resolved by conceptual ones, since to understand what "things" are is something which emerges from our apprehension of the grammar of their respective concepts. Now all concepts, *qua* concepts, have exactly the same status, that is, they are all the same kind of thing, *viz.*, concepts. Therefore, they all have to be investigated in the same way. So philosophical troubles concerning the essence or nature of things are due to the fact that till Wittgenstein we just lacked a well characterized method of conceptual clarification and of the way it has to be applied since, as I have already said, the clue to the understanding of what the "thing" which interests us "really" is is precisely conceptual research or, in Wittgenstein's words, grammatical investigation. "Essence is expressed by grammar".[3] Obviously, Wittgensteinian grammatical investigation (in this case, about the concept of time) sharply contrasts, as we shall see in a moment, with conventional philosophical theories about time.

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[2] Hans Reichenbach, I believe, is a good example of this. See his *The Philosophy of Space and Time* (New York: Dover Publications, 1958).

[3] L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1974), sect. 371.

II) *Some Puzzles concerning Time*

Before attempting to exhibit and criticize, in the spirit of a mature Wittgensteinianism, some sources of difficulties concerning time, it will be useful to present briefly some of the well known enigmas about it. It is not my aim here to carry out a particular detailed description of the problems, but simply to illustrate the sort of complication this concept generates in order to contrast it with Wittgenstein's novel approach and diagnoses.

A) *Saint Augustine*. Perhaps the most perplexing of all puzzles connected with time is the one St. Augustine explicitly raises, namely, that of its unreality and (as a consequence) of its essentially mental nature, *i.e.*, its being an affection of the mind or, in his terminology, of the soul. There is a sense in which in this view time unavoidably becomes something unreal: since future is not yet and past is no longer, the only temporal reality has to be the present and, if we take the reasoning one step further, only the specious present. To talk of measuring time can therefore only mean to speak of a capacity of the mind to retain (thanks to memory) past events. Needless to say that the idea of the world associated with this view of time is absolutely unintelligible. The problem is: how to get rid of it?

B) *Kant*. The Kantian conception of time is well-known and has been (and probably will always be) the object of all sorts of analysis and discussions, although it is worth observing that at least in so far as the nature of time is concerned practically nobody has ever considered himself a Kantian. With respect to time, Kant makes two important claims:

      a) that (together with space) time is the pure form of intuition, and
      b) that time is the form of inner sense.

Kantian transcendental idealism, on the other hand, commits him to the view that we simply cannot know whether or not time is objective, in the sense of being real of things in themselves and not only of objects of possible experience. The only thing we can be sure of is that time is a necessary presupposition for the possibility of experience. Clearly this is alarmingly ambiguous. If what Kant holds is that the idea of an object, and hence of the world, is unintelligible if we are unable to establish temporal connections, although debatable his position is understandable. But if, as some seem to believe, the thesis Kant advocates is that had there been no minds then there would have been no time (as well as no space), then his stance is utterly unacceptable. On the other hand, the idea of time as the form of inner sense makes him fall into the grave mistake of trying to start from "the given" in order to construct public time out of it. Why and how should all individual minds coincide is something his philosophy never sufficiently explains.

C) *McTaggart*.[4] In order to maintain his astonishing view that time is unreal, McTaggart has conjoined several thesis, all of them quite problematic. First, he assumes that time implies change and that change cannot be explained without the categories of past, present and future, as opposed to "earlier than" and "later than". Secondly, there is the idea that the categories of present, past and future are both essential to time and "unreal", since they lead to contradictions; it is also interesting to note, thirdly, that he makes use of an important metaphysical principle, called by Russell the 'axiom of internal relations', according to which relations are essential to their *relata*. That is why McTaggart feels justified in making picturesque assertions like "The sand of a sand-castle on the English coast changes the nature of the Great Pyramid".[5] All his claims and analysis can of course be criticized, but it is not our purpose here to discuss in detail his arguments but simply to state the core of his conception of time.

D) *Russell*. Russell holds different things at different moments, so that it seems impossible to get from his writings a single, coherent doctrine. In some texts, for instance, temporal relations as "before" and "after" are said to be known by acquaintance. "Thus we must suppose that we are acquainted with the meaning of 'before', and not merely with instances of it".[6] When we know a truth like '*a* is before *b*' we of course are acquainted with both *a* and *b*, but we also know by acquaintance (although of course not in the same way, that is, through the senses) the abstract relation "being before than". This suggests that the categories "before" and "after" are more fundamental and logically prior to other temporal relations, like "past", "present" and "future", which apparently can be constructed out of them. "This immediate knowledge by memory is the source of all our knowledge concerning the past: without it, there could be no knowledge of the past by inference, since we should never know that there was anything past to be inferred".[7] However, in a slightly previous essay, Russell advocates exactly the opposite view and thus he maintains that "before" and "after" are so to speak secondary or derivative, the fundamental ones being precisely "present", "past" and "future". The latter have to do with the relations between the subject and things outside him. Thus Russell introduces the dichotomy "physical time – mental time" and reserves 'mental time' to speak of past, present and future. His view is then that "Although, in the finished logical theory of time, physical time is simpler than mental time, yet in the analysis of experience it would seem that mental time must come first".[8] So which are the fundamental temporal categories is something very difficult to be clear

[4] J. M. E McTaggart, "Time" en *The Philosophy of Time*. Edited by Richard M. Gale (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1968), pp. 86-97.
[5] J. M. E. McTaggart, *Ibid.*, p. 89.
[6] B. Russell, *Mysticism and Logic* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1976), p.155.
[7] B. Russell, *Problems of Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), p.26.
[8] B. Russell, "On the Experience of Time" in *The Collected Papers of Bertrand Russell Volume 7* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1984), p. 64.

about. The truth is that were we asked what is Russell's concrete position with respect to time, we would not know what to answer.

Of course, difficulties and contradictions like those just mentioned can be found not only in the thinkers just quoted, but in practically every philosopher who has dealt with the subject of time. I believe however that, thanks to his quite original method of dissolving philosophical puzzles, the mature Wittgenstein not only avoids the traditional kind of philosophical error, but gives us the elements to get rid of philosophical enigmas in a definitive way. It is debatable whether or not the same thing holds of the view advocated in the *Tractatus*. Let us first have a look at what young Wittgenstein had to say about time in his famous first book.

III) *The solipsist view of time*

This is not the right place to develop in detail an argument in favour of my interpretation of the *Tractatus* but, for the purposes I set myself, I think that a good test or way of showing that the interpretation in question is right is that as a matter of fact it enables us to give a satisfactory account of the passages of the book and especially of those concerning time. My view is the following: the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* contains the best possible expression of the solipsistic picture of the world. That is, the book offers the best possible view of factual reality, logic, mathematics, science, values, knowledge, the meaning of life, etc., which could be elaborated **from the subject's perspective**. Clearly, in the philosophy of the *Tractatus* there is no place for others, just as history and the social character of language are simply ignored. Wittgenstein simply assumes that he speaks for the rest of us and that once we have grasped his meaning, we shall all agree with what he says, for putting ourselves in his place and repeating the sentences he wrote, we could easily confirm that what he says is true. There are multiple passages which confirm that the solipsistic *Weltanschauung* was indeed Wittgenstein's goal. In this respect, the *Notebooks* are particularly revealing too. He explicitly states there for instance: "I want to report how *I* found the world",[9] a pronouncement which doesn't allow any ambiguity at all; and, more brutally perhaps, he also says: "What has history to do with me? Mine is the first and only world!".[10] On the other hand, the explicit acknowledgement in the *Tractatus* that what the solipsist wants to say but cannot say is in this respect just as conclusive.[11] We all know, of course, that given the interpretative richness of the book, alternative interpretations will always be possible, but it can be argued that they will either leave unexplained many passages of the book or probably be incoherent or simply unconvincing. For the time being, I

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[9] L. Wittgenstein, *Nothebooks 1914-1916* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), p. 82e.
[10] L. Wittgenstein, *Ibid*., p. 82e.
[11] L. Wittgenstein. *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), 5.62 and 5.621.

shall just point out, first, that my view fits perfectly well with some of the exegetical work which, in my opinion, belong to the best of all, *viz.*, Jaakko Hintikka's [12] and, secondly, that the solipsistic interpretation of the book enables us to give a much clearer account of what Wittgenstein says about time than alternative interpretations and that it does contribute to a coherent reading of the book as a whole. I shall try now to show that this is indeed the case.

The first thing to be said is that in the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein has not one but two different notions of time; accordingly, he distinguishes between what could be called 'objective time' and 'subjective time'. If, regardless of the way we characterize them, we accept this distinction, the solipsist's project with respect to time becomes immediately clear. Curiously enough, his goal is to establish the reality of objective time while rejecting that of subjective time. What Wittgenstein does is to argue in favour of the reality of time with respect to objects (since time, like space and color, are formal properties of objects, which are the elements of all possible worlds), while rejecting the idea of time as something we can have experience of. Subjectively time is unreal. His stance, as I shall try to make clear, is perhaps not as absurd as it could be thought of at first sight.

In a passage filled with clear anti-realist intentions, Wittgenstein asserts that "We cannot compare a process with 'the passage of time' ─ there is no such thing ─ but only with another process (such as the working of a chronometer).
Hence we can describe the lapse of time only by relying on some other process".[13]

It is difficult to say whether or not this pronouncement implies that time as such is unreal, but what is clear is that for Wittgenstein it is not an object of experience. Surely for us as knowing subjects there is no such thing as time in the sense in which there are, say, tables or lions or, more generally, "objects" (whatever they are). The world has nonetheless a coloured-spatio-temporal structure. The point seems to be that the idea of a world would be utterly unintelligible were we unable to make temporal measurements ("after than", "future", "right now" and so on). So Wittgenstein seems here to be surprisingly near to philosophers like Aristotle, for whom time is basically the measure of change. Thus for Wittgenstein the concept of time serves solely to determine, calculate, manipulate, etc., the change processes of objects we meet with in experience; moreover, it is always to be understood by reference to some special, arbitrarily chosen, process. As a purely empirical hypothesis, it could affirmed that most probably the original process in the construction of the concept of time was the movement of the sun. In view of the latter's obvious importance for life, it had to be (and in fact it still is) by reference to

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[12] See especially his book (written in collaboration with Merrill B. Hintikka) *Investigating Wittgenstein* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986).
[13] L. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Lógico-Philosophicus*, 6.3611 (a) (b).

it that the rest of processes and activities had to be measured. But whether or not it was like that it is completely irrelevant and, moreover, the object or process which functions as the axis of temporal reference may change. If, for instance, we wish to determine who won a race the framework of reference will no longer be the movement of the sun across the sky, but a watch or a chronometer. What could be called 'parameter processes' may be improved in order to meet the speakers' practical requirements. But all this seems to imply that the idea of time as something objective, composed of an ordered infinite set of real entities (instants), something **in** which objects are, has to be discarded. Contrary to Newton's assumptions, for whom time was a substance, for Wittgenstein the idea of time is rather the idea of a mechanism which is however necessary for the world to have a structure and to be intelligible. It could be thought that this is all that could reasonably be said about it. The solipsist Wittgenstein, however, has still something important to say.

Jacques Bouveresse has brilliantly stated the solipsistic idea of the world put forward in the *Tractatus*: "For us it will suffice to note that the universe of the *Tractatus* is anyway a that of a completely atomized one, not only spatially but temporally as well, in which there is no place for continuity and movement, a universe without events and history" (translation mine. ATB).[14] It is evident that for the solipsist the world is or rather **has** to be **now** the totality of facts, that is, the world includes now **all** the facts, *i.e.*, the facts that were, those are and those that will be. In this sense, to speak of past or future is to have recourse to mere linguistic conventions, useful forms of speaking to impose a convenient order upon the whole of experiences. But the point is that, strictly speaking, from the subject's point of view there is simply no such thing as duration, temporal reality, apart from the eternal present each "I" lives in. So it is indeed the solipsist who speaks through Wittgenstein when he asserts that "The world is *my* world".[15] This world is, however, submitted to logic; there is an order in it. The world, regardless of its being mine, is not a mere chaos, a random or chaotic collection of experiences. My (the) world is organized: some experiences come after others, some come before, some are simultaneous to others, but at every stage I group them together, I order them and have them organized. "Time" is needed to state our view of the world, but the self is, so to speak, fixed outside time. Thus time cannot be something different and above the ordered sequence of experiences, that is, of **my** experiences. Now there is a sense in which, by making Wittgenstein reject a realist or objectivist conception of time, partially at least, solipsism forces him also to get rid of the notions of past and future, as applied to the subject himself. Here Wittgenstein seems to have been prey to the same confusion which befell St. Augustine. From their common perspective, so far as the self is concerned, real time, the only time there can be, is a permanent or eternal present. The solipsist might argue that, on a purely linguistic plane, there

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[14] J. Bouveresse, *La Rime et la Raison* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1973), p.47.
[15] L. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, 5.62 (c).

is no problem at all: the only thing that has to be done is to put systematically the expression 'now' before the usual discourse. For instance, to say that Napoleon died in St. Helen is to say that I learn now (I hear or read) what is expressed in what I call 'past tense', namely, that Napoleon died in St. Helen; to say that tomorrow will rain is to say that I calculate now that an event (*i.e.*, raining) described in what I call 'future tense' takes place, and so on. In this sense, time can be nothing else than a mere ordering of **my** experiences, of the world, that is, of the world of objects I encounter. This makes clear the content of the important proposition to the effect that "If we take eternity to mean not infinite temporal duration but timelessness, then eternal life belongs to those who live in the present".[16] Thus although undoubtedly the world has a temporal structure, so far as the knowing metaphysical subject is concerned, real time can only be an eternal present, enriched by the data of memory and states like expectation and this is nothing but the vindication of atemporality.

An obvious manifestation of philosophical confusion is that it ends up in a thesis which, as all of its kind, is openly paradoxical, counter-intuitive, opposed to common-sense and to the normal modes of speaking. Such is, probably, the final position reached in the *Tractatus*. However, I also think that it was Wittgenstein himself who prepared the tools to refute what was there maintained. Without debating explicitly with the *Tractatus*, I shall rapidly present the elements thanks to which the mature Wittgenstein put himself in a position to free himself from the simultaneously hypnotic and misleading effect of certain metaphors and modes of speaking and could thereby "retrieve time". But we have first to carry out some kind of analysis of this important concept.

IV) *Notes about the grammar of "time"*

Before presenting Wittgenstein's final view about time, let us quickly examine some expressions in which the term 'time' is actually employed. Let us take, for instance, the idea of "wasting time". What is this expression used for? Well a possible situation is the following one: someone has his life organized in such a way that his day divides itself into previously programmed activities. He knows what he has to do during the whole day and let us suppose that he sticks very rigidly to his time-table and plans. Let us further imagine that a friend calls him up and invites him to the cinema. The answer could be: "Look, I've got no time to waste!". Every normal speaker would understand perfectly well the situation and what is being said. What is not transparent at all is the philosophical interpretation of what this fellow **meant**. According to me, he must have meant something like "I'm busy", "I've already scheduled my day", "I can't change my activities for today", "I'm more interested in doing what I'm doing right now than in going to the cinema", and so forth. At any

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[16] L. Wittgenstein, *Ibid.*, 6.4311 (b).

rate, there is something clear: the only thing the speaker didn't mean is what could be the literal reading of the expression. It is not a question of losing or wasting a piece of something called 'time'. To interpret 'I have no time to waste' taking as a model 'I have no marbles to play with' would be just absurd. 'Time' doesn't serve in this case to designate something which could be lost or gained. In this case to speak of time is basically to allude to a set of organized activities.

A second example would be 'to have plenty of time'. Once again, its literal reading is palpably absurd, since normally 'to have' and 'to possess' are equivalent, but what would it mean to speak of "possessing time"? Nothing intelligible. 'To have time' is used to indicate that one can carry out activities which had not been previously considered. If someone asks a friend 'have you got some spare time to come with me to the university?', what he is asking is something like 'would it be possible for you to include among your activities going with me today to the university?'. This example reinforces the idea that 'time' is not the name for something special or particular.

Let us imagine now a teacher who begins his narration as follows: "A long, long time ago, ….'. What could he possible be saying by that? What would such an expression be useful for to him? I think the answer is both simple and clear: he is pointing to a certain order in the events of the narration, *i.e.*, the starting point. This example is connected with other linguistic considerations to which I shall return later on. At all events, it should be clear that, as long as what is at stake is, say, a tale, 'time' could not possibly designate anything real, otherwise we should then be capable of speaking of a fictitious time, as opposed to a real one, and what on earth could that be? A sort of pragmatical reading of the expression is by far the most reasonable one.

Let us consider a final example. Let us suppose that during a political debate a member of a party says to a colleague: "Don't worry. Time is on our side". I don't think that, were we forced to impose upon this sentence a direct or literal reading, we would be able to say something sensible about its meaning and, *a fortiori*, it could not be possibly said of us that we did understand what was said. We would have to assume that there is a kind of medium in which objects and persons lie and that that medium would move in such a way (*e.g.*, as a pendulum) that the balance would incline in favour of someone. It is evident, I suppose, that to interpret in this way what is being said would just be crazy. What is meant is that certain events or changes will take place such that it will be possible for the common ideals to materialize, that sooner or later the efforts to achieve previously fixed goals will be fruitful, that the decisions taken were the right ones, and so on. That and not any other thing is what is meant by someone who uses the expression 'time is on our side'. Notice that it could also be used as a threat or as a warning. This, however, is

not incompatible with his other, colloquial meaning, which is the one we are interested in here.

What can we infer from what has been said up to now? Several consequences, whose importance are worth taking into account. First, the examples suggest that **the concept of time is not a concept of experience**. 'Time' is not used to allude or to give expression to a particular, special experience. Against what was held by Bergson and others, I wish to maintain that **there is no such thing as the experience of time**. Here we certainly can accept what is said in the *Tractatus*. Secondly, the examples indicate that the concept of time is above all what could be called an **'organizational'** or '**classificatory**' concept. What does it help to organize or classify? Basically, our activities. The concept of time enables speakers to coordinate their activities, both potential and real. This seems to be, if not the fundamental one, at least one of the most important functions of this concept. Along with it another idea that comes in is that the core of the notion of time has to do with something public and that if there is another concept of time, a purely mental or subjective one, it will have to be taken as a merely derivative one. In summary, the concept of time is basically an operative one, characterized by a huge functionality, since it serves to coordinate no more and no less than the **whole** of activities and experiences of the totality of speakers. It is only on such a basis that it becomes possible to retrieve all sorts of times (mental time and physical time, past and before, biological and imaginary times, etc.), for all of them spring in one way or another from our natural concept of time.

V) *The retrieving of time*

A solipsist that, as Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus*, acknowledges the reality of the world, would be quite satisfied with a twofold conception of time: on the one hand the idea of an objective structure for objects and, on the other hand, the idea of an eternal present, of timelessness, for the knowing subject. The trouble is that this does not seem to be a coherent global position. It is perhaps true that if the world is "my" world, temporal notions like before or after suffice to organize the whole of my experience, but if I take into account (as it seems I should) that there are other sentient beings, beings who think, reason, have intentions, desires and so forth just as I do, then the solipsist's time (call it 'mental', 'phenomenological', 'subjective' or 'experienced') will be very difficult to accommodate all these private times in a coherent way and, most probably, such time will turn out to be nothing else than a philosophical myth. Moreover, such time seems to be logically and factually independent of common time and thus we are left with two independent sets of temporal notions. Indeed, the problem with the solipsist's time is exactly the same as the problem of trying to reconstruct the external world starting from one person's perceptions, memories and so on (together with the laws of logic). We nowadays

know that such programmes are a complete failure and this applies to time as well. What is needed is a concept of time which from the beginning would embrace in a single whole, among other things, other people's times. We need, therefore, one temporal net which would contain both the time of objects and the time of persons. In other words, we need an all-embracing objective concept of time. Now from my point of view, this shared structure is actually given by language and, in particular, by the verbs and their tenses. This concept of time is rather a kind of metrics, with different aspects, whose main point is to organize in a non-spatial way the shared system of speakers' activities and of facts identified by reference to those activities. In both cases we need all temporal notions ("before", "now", "past", "future" and so on). Let us see why.

Wittgenstein faced in different stages of his thinking the subject of time and, as Hintikka[17] rightly points out, his views are a function of his evolution concerning other subjects (object, meaning, rules, etc.). In particular, the changes in his conception of language did alter his conception of time and contributed to its improvement. Wittgenstein was aware that the concept of time is an extremely elusive one. "'Time' as a substantive is terribly misleading",[18] but his new technique of philosophical analysis automatically put him in a better position to dissolve the puzzles our complex concept of time very easily gives rise to. Before considering in detail what I take to be his final conception, let us quickly see how he draws the distinctions I mentioned above. From notes of his classes we have the following statement

> *We have here two independent orders of events (1) the order of events in our memory. Call this memory time. (2) the order in which information is got by asking different people, 5 – 4 – 3 o'clock. Call this information time. In information time there will be past and future with respect to a particular time. And in memory time, with respect to an event, there will also be past and future. Now if you want to say that the order of information is memory time, you can. And if you are going to talk about information and memory time, then you can say that you remember the past. If you remember that which* **in information** *time is future, you can say "I remember the future".*[19]

According to Wittgenstein, we need two concepts of time, one which serves basically to order experiences and another one to order events. In the first case no particular date is involved. Dates appear with the second one, that is, with the inter-subjective notion of time, thanks to which the activities of the community of

[17] J. Hintikka, Wittgenstein on being and time", Theoria 62 (1-2), 1996, pp. 3-18.
[18] L. Wittgenstein, "Philosophy" in *Wittgenstein's Lectures. Cambridge 1932-1935*. Edited by Alice Ambrose (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1979), p.15.
[19] L. Wittgenstein, *Ibid.*, p.15.

speakers can be coordinated. Now it is important to understand that we don't have here two applications of one and the same concept (as in the case of "pain") but two different concepts of time and also that they are nevertheless related to each other and could not possibly exist in isolation, as Wittgenstein had believed in the *Tractatus*.

In his masterful paper, "Wittgenstein on being and time", Hintikka shows that Wittgenstein's criticism of the *Tractatus'* conception of time was due to his abandoning of the notion of pictoriality (that is, the pictorial character of propositions). Soon after his return to philosophy, Wittgenstein very quickly got rid of the *Tractarian* idea that a proposition is simply something that is directly compared with reality. Wittgenstein was at the time increasingly recognizing the importance of the application of language and this in turn led him to confer on propositions a more practical or pragmatical or even praxiological character. But this change brings along with it the idea of a physical world and, therefore, the idea of public time. For Wittgenstein, from 1929 onwards, it was therefore more and more difficult to go on advocating the idea of a purely phenomenological time, *i.e.*, the solipsist's concept of time. Moreover, his emphatic rejection of the philosophical idea of privacy forced Wittgenstein to get rid of any idea of time about which we simply cannot speak in public language. "Ergo", Hintikka concludes, "the time we live in is memory-time, but the only time we can directly speak of in our language is information-time. Thus Wittgenstein's change of mind had clear-cut implications for his conception of time. It meant a total victory of physical time".[20]

Before raising a couple of objections to Hintikka's reconstruction of Wittgenstein's ideas about time, we have to finish the overall picture he elaborates for us. According to him, the Wittgensteinian dichotomy "memory time – information time" is "a special case of two different general distinctions. They are the distinction between perspectival vs. public identification and between phenomenological and physicalistic language systems".[21] In fact, Hintikka identifies Wittgenstein's dichotomy "memory time - information time" with his own distinction between "perspectival identification" and "public identification". In this respect, Hintikka says something which, in my view, leads him in a quite different direction than Wittgenstein's. According to Hintikka, we have to take into account the contrast "between two kinds of discourse, involving two different kinds of objects identified. Very briefly, in our actual thinking and speaking we are tacitly using two different cognitive systems. The difference does not lie in a difference between different cognitive attitudes, for instance between two different kinds of knowledge or two kinds of memory. It lies in the way we identify the objects of our perception, knowledge or memory".[22] Thus, in Hintikka's interpretation, the objects

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[20] J. Hintikka, "Wittgenstein on being and time", p.11.
[21] J. Hintikka, *Ibid.*, p. 11.
[22] J. Hintikka, *Ibid.*, p. 11.

of memory time are identical with phenomenological objects and since Wittgenstein rejected the latter, he had to gave way to the public mode of identification **at the expense of the perspectival identification** one. It is worth noticing that Hintikka accepts that the perspectival identification is simply a variety of physicalistic language, that is, natural language, but does not draw out the consequences of this rather important fact. For him the problem is the relation between the two systems of identification and natural language. "But what is the relationship of the two kinds of frameworks to ordinary language and to its semantics? Here Wittgenstein reached an important insight. Wittgenstein realized that the 'grammar' we use in describing our immediate experiences is different from the 'grammar' (semantics) of ordinary discourse. The world we live in may in some sense be a world of phenomenological objects, but the world we speak of in our ordinary language is indeed the world of physical objects. Speaking more generally, he in effect realized, even though he expressed his point in a different terminology, that almost all of *the semantics of our language relies in its operation on the public mode of identification*".[23]

Now I think that, although there is plenty of elucidatory observations in Hintikka's paper, he nevertheless is seriously wrong on certain points. Roughly speaking, it can be objected, first, that there is nothing more alien to Wittgenstein's perspective than Hintikka's rather vague and inexact way of speaking about language (*e.g.*, "almost all the semantics": how much of it?); secondly, and more importantly, I think that it is implied by Hintikka's reconstruction that Wittgenstein aimed, with respect to verbs like 'remember', at privileging the third as opposed to the first person and this must be wrong. And, thirdly, I hold that for Wittgenstein the issue of the connection between those two identification systems and natural language was senseless, since for him **both of them were a part of or belonged to it**. Therefore it seems to me a sheer mistake to ascribe to Wittgenstein the idea that memory time **has** to be conceived as a time of phenomenological objects. I shall presently try to make clear why what Hintikka asserts under this heading is wrong.

Hintikka seems to advocate the idea that Wittgenstein was trying to reduce one identification mode (the "perspectival" one) to another (the "public" one). In my view, **both** modes are not only irreducible to each other but indispensable. Wittgenstein himself introduces the notions of "memory-time" and "information-time". So from his point of view the memory-time language-game is as objective as the information-time language-game. In both cases we can speak of past, present or future and of earlier than or later than, but in one case I speak of what really happened and in the other case I speak of what I remember. What I remember may coincide with what happened, but it may also be false. In this sense, "private" time is as objective as "public" time, although of course the concepts are applied in accordance with different rules. For instance, they are not verified in the same way.

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[23] J. Hintikka, *Ibid*, p. 14.

Anyway, the crucial point is that it is only if both are used that we can draw the contrasts we usually need. This is so for, as a matter of fact, we just don't stay at a fixed position, but are constantly moving around a set of objects which are incessantly moving too. Thus we need not one but two different modes of identifying and coordinating them in a single homogeneous whole. Something similar happens with the personal pronoun 'I': it's not because we discovered that there is no such thing as an "I", a self, that 'I' becomes meaningless or that we have to forget about it. After all, there is the use of 'I' as "object" and its use as "subject". What we have to grasp and understand are its different sets of rules, to understand, *e.g.*, that the denotation of 'I' changes depending upon who occupies the center of language. It would be very strange if the grammar of words like 'I' or 'time' were not significantly more complex than that of a simple noun like 'chair'.

So as a matter of fact we need not two but four temporal series, that is, the series <"earlier than"-"now"-"later than>" and the series <"past"-"present"-"future"> applied in two different ways. They are first needed to identify events, but they are also needed to give expression to our memories. Were we to lack the information-time language-game, we would be unable to describe the world and were we to lack the memory-time language-game we would be unable to speak of remembering anything whatever; we would be unable to explain, *e.g.*, memory errors. Let us consider one example to justify our claim.

Let us suppose that we want to speak of, say, the battle of Austerlitz. We may wish to do, first, two different things. If I say that the battle of Austerlitz is a past event, the only thing I'm doing is to locate it within a particular set of events. But then I cannot identify it, for such a set includes countless other objects or events which will all have the same property, *viz.*, being past items. If I want to identify the battle of Austerlitz and distinguish it from, say, the battle of Eylau, both being past events, then I shall have to use the notions of "before" and "after", since these words introduce asymmetrical relations and with them the idea of order, which can then be applied to groups of events. In other words, these categories enable us to structure them; in fact that is what they were created for. So it would be impossible for us to forgo any of the two series: in one case I locate the battle of Austerlitz within a group which has as an axis my present, and if I wish to point to it I shall have to employ the "before" and "after" categories. Only then shall I be able to locate at a precise point the first of the above mentioned battles and to distinguish it from the second one. The truth is that it makes no sense to ask which set of temporal categories has priority, since my interests may change. On some occasions, when I already know that an event is previous to another one, what I may wish to know is whether they are future, present or past events. What would happen if we had only one temporal series? Clearly there would be many things we just would be unable to express. If the only thing I can say is that *x* is before or after *y*, I won't be able to answer questions like 'when …?', and if I only have the "past-present-future"

categories I will be able neither to order them in a sequence nor to identify each element of the group. The two systems are independent of each other, in the sense that they are irreducible, but that does not make them dispensable. It could perhaps be argued that the notions of past, present and future are more basic than "before" or "previous to" and "after" or "later than", since the former enable us to group together huge blocks of events, while the latter put an order on already conformed blocks of them. For my part, I take the issue of priority as both irrelevant and trivial. What we have to understand is that both are necessary, but not sufficient temporal systems.

Now this cannot be the end of the story, for I may speak of what I remember or do not remember. Now how are we going to account for such mistakes? Anybody may be wrong in making a memory claim, we may remember something more or less vaguely, we may confuse the order of events or even memories with fantasies or hallucinations. Thus memory-time is simply not reducible to information-time. What has to be avoided, therefore, is not the idea of memory-time itself, but its solipsistic interpretation. When I say that something happened, I imply that I remember it, that is, I locate it in the set of my memories at such and such point, *i.e.*, as present as opposed to future and as earlier that some event and later than another one. But my memory may or may not correspond exactly to the actual happening of events and thus my memory-time statement may or may not correspond to information-time proposition. On the other hand, it is clear that memory claims are public statements, moves in a particular language-game and not the expression of something only the subject has access to. The idea of memory-time, therefore, does not compel us to accept anything connected with the philosophical notion of privacy.

If what I have said is right, it follows that it is a mistake to link, as Hintikka does, the Wittgensteinian notion of memory-time with the solipsistic pseudo-concept of time and, therefore, with phenomenological objects, private objects of "immediate experience" and so forth. The "total victory" of physical time does not imply the abolition or the transformation of memory-time. After all, few things are as alien to Wittgenstein's way of thinking as the idea that there is a world in which we live and another world we speak of, an idea that Hintikka does ascribe to Wittgenstein. It would be quite useful to carry out an analysis of expressions like 'I remember that' or 'he remembers that'. For obvious reasons I cannot do that in this paper and so I will not be able to show in detail why the idea of memory in the first person does not commit us to internal, private and mental objects. I think we can now go on to present, although in a rather sketchy way, what could be said from a Wittgensteinian point of view about traditional philosophical theories concerning time.

VI) *Diagnosis of puzzles*

It would be extremely dogmatic (and rather clumsy) to state in a categorical way that all the puzzles concerning time and which have worried the most brilliant minds throughout history have been solved once and for all. Nevertheless some progress has been realized and, I hold, mainly thanks to Wittgenstein's insights and conceptual apparatus. We have to bear in mind that our study has not an empirical character and thus it is not meant to have genetic implications or connotations. We are describing no phases of mental evolution, just as we are not interested in establishing any kind of temporal or cognitive hierarchy or primacy. Still less is our aim to "reduce" one concept of time to another. There have been, however, throughout the history of philosophy, thinkers who have tried to develop "programmes" which instantiate one or other of the above mentioned options. For us, the concept of time emerges from natural language and is in this sense indisputable. What we ask is above all: which use do we make of the concept of time? After all what was this concept coined for? Questions like these indicate that what really matters is in the end the language of time.

With this in the back of our minds, let us face first the intriguing puzzle of the unreality of past and future and, correspondingly, the sole reality of the present. The truth is that any speaker is capable of feeling tempted into saying that only the present is real. Here the interesting question is: why is it that, occasionally at least, we all feel like saying things like that? The diagnosis is, I think, clear: the speaker's trouble is similar to the problem that someone has who believes that "experience" is only what he has, what happens to him; other people just behave like he does when he feels pain, but the experience of pain is something that only he can have. What such people don't seem to understand is that the concept of experience has two different modes of application and that what is absurd is to try to explain its use in the first person in terms of its use of the third person, or the other way around. What has to be done is to recognize both uses. So in the case of past, present and future, what has to be understood is that there are true propositions in present tense as well as true propositions in past tense. Both may be true and false and both have their peculiar or *sui generis* mode of being verified, refuted, contrasted, accommodated with others and so on. It could even be admitted that there is a sense in which all of them are verified in the present. This, however, doesn't matter, since they are not verified in the same way. 'My neighbour is having a party right now' is not verified in the same way as 'Napoleon died in St. Helen in 1821', even if there is a sense in which both are verified in the present. Thus whoever rejects the reality of the past must be someone who thinks that the only possible way to verify propositions is to verify them as sentences in the present tense are. Indeed, he must be in a serious state of confusion. This diagnosis is interesting, I think, because if accepted, that is, if one accepts the point made by it, then we no longer feel like saying what we were tempted to say. Once we understand that we may have different classes of true

propositions we shall no longer try at all costs to reduce the tense of some of them to the tense of others; we then shall no longer wish to state that only the present is real.

The empiricists exemplify quite well another sort of philosophical error, namely, 'psychologism'. I must say that in general, and in particular with respect to time, to link conceptual analysis to psychological and introspective exercises seems to me to be dangerously misguided. Locke and Russell, to quote just two of the greatest representatives of empiricism, are good instances of it. To explain time both of them appeal to introspection, to the powers of the mind, to memory and so on, without realizing that all that is wholly irrelevant for the understanding of the common or normal meaning (*i.e.*, non technical meaning) of, say, 'remembering', 'memory', 'before', 'instant', etc. Their approach is similar to somebody's approach for whom in order to determine the meaning of 'eating' it would be necessary to speak of gastric liquids. This is obviously wrong, because although empirically it is a fact that the act of eating is linked to the action of gastric liquids, this is a *datum* known *a posteriori*, an empirical discovery which logically presupposes that the meaning of 'eating' has already been grasped. So we can infer that the notion of gastric liquid is not included in the meaning of the verb 'to eat' and that, therefore, it is irrelevant for its clarification. The same happens, *mutatis mutandis*, with the ideas of time and, say, memory. Locke, for example, tries to get the idea of time out of the idea of succession of experiences, images, thoughts and so on, not realizing that the very idea of succession is already a temporal idea. For his part, Russell pushes forward the same idea to its last consequences and so he holds that what we know by acquaintance can only be the specious present, that is, what has just passed but still remains in consciousness and that it is thanks to this peculiar experience that we can know what the past is. Few thesis, I must confess, seem to me as absurd as this one. Nevertheless, his systems requires it, for otherwise there would be a kind of empirical knowledge which would not be founded on acquaintance.

As a matter of fact and very broadly speaking, philosophical theories incorporate or take shape in myths, which clearly have their source in deep misunderstandings of certain forms of speaking, of certain ways of expressing ourselves. In the end, such myths turn out to be very pernicious. Myths like that are, for instance, the myths of the self, of intentionality, of pure temporal succession apprehended in introspection, of eternal truths, etc. The great advantage (and indeed, superiority) of the Wittgensteinian approach is precisely that it enables us to avoid such myths, to get rid of them, freeing us from their hypnotic spell. The case of time, if I'm not mistaken, shows that it is so. From this perspective, as some philosophers have asserted it, *e.g.*, that time is not real amounts to asserting that 'time' has no regular, objective, socially sanctioned use. This is impossible to accept and, accordingly, the corresponding philosophical thesis **must** be utterly misguided.

VII) *Final comments*

I would like to end this essay by presenting in a somewhat compact way the central features of the concept of time, features milked from an examination of its application. Thus perhaps the first thing we have to say is to recall that 'time' denotes neither something external nor something internal to us. The concept of time has nothing to do with "immediate experience". In other words, to speak of the "experience of time" is to create one more philosophical myth. It is the natural outcome of a grammatical illusion. This, however, does not imply that the concept of time is not an empirical one, as opposed to a, say, mathematical concept. It is obviously a concept which applies to the world. But if it is empirically applicable and is not a concept of experience, what kind of concept it is then? My view is that it is basically an organizational and coordinating concept. Thanks to it the users of language may coordinate their activities and organize their lives with respect to the constant change of both objects and speakers. This explains why the language of time takes shape in the first place in the lexicon of dates (months, years, days, hours, etc.). In this sense, the concept of time is not only unavoidable but needed and, given the importance of its role, it is even understandable that its having been labeled '*a priori*'. It follows from what I have been saying that the idea of an objectless world is the idea of a timeless world. But what sort of idea is the idea of a objectless, completely empty world? Surely it is an unintelligible idea. Therefore, the idea of a timeless world is utterly nonsensical. Now what all this entails is that philosophical discussions like those concerning the reality or the irreality of time are not only sterile but cognitively useless, completely lacking sense. And finally, I wish to point out that, just as happens in psychology with concepts which emanate from natural language,[24] the "mother" or source concept, that is, the natural concept of time, may give rise to a technical one, which will turn out to be a function of the theoretical and practical requirements of disciplines like biology, psychology or astrophysics. There is a legitimate sense for expressions like 'biological time', 'psychological time', 'physical time' and so on. This natural conceptual transfiguration does create, as is to be expected, new philosophical puzzles about which, however, I will not even try to occupy myself in this essay.

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[24] See my "Materialism, Interactionism and Grammatical Analysis" in my book *Essays in the Philosophy of Psychology* (Guadalajara: Universidad de Guadalajara, 1994).