

Does Anyone Really Know What Time Is?

Are We In Time? : And Other Essays on Time and Temporality

By Charles M. Sherover, Edited and with a preface by Gregory R. Johnson

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Reviewed by Steven J. Hendlin

Charles Sherover has been philosophizing about time for a long time now. Beginning in 1971, with his *Heidegger, Kant and Time*, continuing with his *Time, Freedom and the Common Good* (1989), and then, more recently publishing *The Human Experience of Time* (2001), the present work, “*Are We In Time?*” rounds out over 30 years of focusing on the value of time as it relates to basic areas of human concern. In these 11 essays, he considers time in conjunction with cognition, morality, action, physical nature, being, God, the question of freedom, and politics.

Sherover wants us to take time seriously, answering the question he poses, “are we *in* time?” with the answer that it is exactly the opposite that is true: time is *in* us. Sherover argues that “because time permeates every activity of the being of the self, it orders the continuity of change in all the complex relations that constitute a self; it permeates the relations each has with others; it appears to be equally pervasive in that dynamic relational system of nature we inhabit and to which we belong.” (p.107). His essays encourage us to understand the essential nature of the time of our lives and especially how our future relates to our freedom.

In Part 1, Sherover offers an overview of the history of time (at least as viewed by continental philosophy) and some conceptual distinctions. The first essay, “The Concept of Time in Western Thought,” surveys the history of thought on time from Parmenides and Heraclites to Whitehead and Heidegger. He makes the distinction between the time of nature and the time of man. This is the difference, as he sees it, between the causal processes in the physical world contrasted with human thinking, planning and deciding. His point is that the temporal flow of natural processes is from the past through the present to the future. The temporal flow of human action moves in the opposite direction, from future to present to past. This is the difference between the push from behind into what lies ahead (causal determinism)

versus the human freedom to choose possibilities to shape our future. This human choosing of our future creates a new present that becomes past, thus the arrow of time flowing from future > present > past.

Part 2 is a “friendly” critique of Kant’s view of time, including an essay on “Time and Ethics: How is Morality Possible?” which argues that Kant’s moral philosophy depends on the reality of freedom and freedom is impossible unless time is real. Another essay in this section questions the basis for belief in a transcendent God who must be spoken of only in negations. Sherover believes that “God must be close enough for us to worship, intelligible enough for us to understand in positive terms” therefore, a “finite being ‘in’ time who, although very wise, beneficent and powerful, is neither omniscient nor omnipotent.” (p. *xix*). Now, that’s a temporal interpretation that would have orthodox, conservative, and reform theologians alike screaming blasphemy!

Temporal Answers to Metaphysical Questions

In Part 3, one essay offers a corrective to the dominant metaphysical tradition that talks about time as if it doesn’t matter. Sherover gives temporal answers to such metaphysical questions as being, internal relations, individuation, mind, free will and the distinction between potentiality and possibility. Another essay argues that since time is “in” us, spatial metaphors for time are not accurate. Time, for Sherover, is not a kind of space. This belief, if I understand it correctly, would seem to fly in the face of contemporary quantum physics, which has taught us to try and grasp the tricky inseparability of time from space, viewing all events in time as occurring in the time-space continuum.

Other essays in Part 3 and Part 4 discuss the thinking of Descartes and offer Sherover’s phenomenology of the temporality of consciousness. He questions the meaningfulness of the ideas of timeless consciousness, timeless truth and timeless being. In the last section, we learn of Sherover’s views on political philosophy as it relates to time.

One problem with this collection of essays is that, while we are given a little bit of this and little bit of that, my overall impression of the collection is that it doesn’t really hang together as a coherent book. It is as if Sherover decided, at the end of a distinguished academic career, to collect and publish various papers that relate only indirectly to each other, giving us a sample of his views on a number of fairly dense philosophical subjects related to time,

all of which he has focused more substantially on in other publications. In itself, this would not be a problem if one already had a familiarity with his work. But for someone like this reviewer, who was interested in this book because of a general interest in the psychology of time, it makes the collection as a whole less than satisfying.

This book may be of interest to academic philosophers and their students but will, unfortunately, likely be lost on the intelligent general reader who is trying to grasp some of the intricacies on the elusive subject of time. Although it was not his intention to go beyond the bounds of Western thinking, what would have rounded out a collection like this would have been to stretch beyond continental philosophy and include something of the Eastern notions of time and the timeless. Since he “questions” the meaningfulness of *exactly* these kinds of concepts, this is asking him to seriously entertain what he now dismisses.

For example, how would Sherover make sense of the Buddhist notion that the world is being created anew in each moment, faster than we can blink our eyes? How would he handle (besides forcing them into time) the various transcendent states of consciousness that have been described and experienced by mystics for a thousand years? The essential ingredient in these states is their timeless quality. But there appears to be no legitimate room for this kind of timeless thinking or experience in Sherover’s philosophy.

How would Sherover make sense of the athlete’s peak performance when he is “in the zone” and time seems to flow effortlessly for hours? Or those states of absorption, when we are so concentrated in what we are doing that we “melt” into time such that we don’t even experience it passing?

While this contribution to the philosophy of time is useful as far as it goes, from my perspective as a psychologist, it doesn’t go far enough. In the ripeness of time, perhaps a philosopher/psychologist will step forward (beyond the contributions already made by Ken Wilber) to combine the best of Western and Eastern thinking on time in a way that shows us not only the freedom inherent in the future, as Sherover has done, but the freedom derived from the transcendence of the future of time, as well.