

A waste of *my* time

In which Orin argues only timeless beings can experience time. Max is not convinced.

Stephen J Brewer, January 2015*

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Scene: An almost deserted airport lounge. Outside, just visible through the plate glass windows the empty mouth of departure Gate 48's jetway sags despondently. Nothing is moving except for Max, pacing up and down glaring at the gate's departure board flashing 'Flight 123 Delayed'. Sitting, Orin is gazing into the fog as if trying to imitate its stillness. His grey head is getting lower and lower.



Max: Orin, guess what! I've been timing our delay and just realized that every five minutes the delay is doubled. Do you realize our flight's departure time is receding into infinity?

Orin: What was that you just said ?

Max: This waiting, it's getting longer and longer, it's such a waste of *my* time!

Orin: I'm glad you realize that this time is *yours to waste*, but if you bothered to look, you would see that I was not wasting *my* time, but rather enjoying it. Anyway, I'm glad you realize that time is mine to waste!

Max: 'My time' is just a phrase, don't get reading so much into it. The time on that

clock over there, that's what's being wasted. Look at that smug thing, it doesn't even tick, just a smoothly moving second hand rotating round and round. I've a ton of things to do, not to be stuck in this dreary place.

Orin: You should take a lesson from the clock and realize that neither of you are in the dimension you call 'time'. If you were, you would not be able to measure it let alone waste it.

Max: Don't talk such nonsense, time like space is everywhere, it's one of the basic physical dimensions of the universe. Without it, nothing would change. It's because of the flow of time that all these sorts of events happen and we're all swept along by it. I can assure you I'm very much in it and so are you. You're not going to philosophise your way out of this dreary airport lounge!

Orin: It is just like flying in this fog, to know which way you are going, you need something that is fixed such as a radio beacon or the lights on a runway. If you were being swept along by



time you would only know the present 'now'. So, to know that changes are occurring you must have a fixed point of reference, and this reference cannot itself be the 'now'.

Max: It's because I've got a memory of the past and can see that there's a change between then and now. If I had no memory, I wouldn't know anything had changed, but with it I can compare and measure a difference between then and now.

Orin: Does this mean that your memory of this recent now is not being swept along by time?

Max: No, this memory is of the past but as I recall it, I bring it into the present so that the two co-exist. That makes sense. I suppose one will have to be labelled, 'actual now', and the other, 'previous now' and I contrast the two and the difference shows what happened during the interval.

Orin: But you still have not solved the problem because by doing this you have brought the external point of reference onto the flight deck and it is moving with you. This is just what would happen if you brought the past into the present, because they are both in the 'now'. Only by remaining an observer outside the flow of time can you know time is flowing. The fact is no instrument can measure itself.

Max: OK. If I were to accept I'm the instrument measuring these changes and don't change, then how do you explain that I'm not the same person I was yesterday or five years ago. From your reasoning, we get two contradictory results so logically your argument is false.

Orin: You say you change, but do you really? I agree that as the flow of events swirl around, your body changes and memories accumulate but that core of being you call yourself, does that really change, and if it did, how would you know unless you were a constant in the whole process?

Max: So, please explain how you can have something that's not caught up in the flow of time.



Orin: You just need to think about how we measure time. We once used the rotation of the earth, then the regular swing of a pendulum, and now the vibration of atoms. These are all cyclic processes that resist the turbulent flow of events. They are self-regenerating physical systems able to provide an unchanging reference point. It is against this unchanging system that we measure the flow of events. In short, because you are not in time you must be a self-regenerating system.

Max: So now you have reduced me to a clock, tic-tock.

Orin: I'm not saying that you or I are simply vibrating crystals, but it is the principle that I am trying to get you to understand. If you apply this principle to our

mental processes, then these must also form a self-regenerating system of thoughts. This mental process allows me to be *the* constant entity during all these changes. Of course, my mind accumulates more memories but this means I can look for comparisons and regularities that help me to survive. When this self-regenerating process is interrupted, 'time stands still' and when recovered, we say 'time flies'. However, the mental structure doing this is real, useful, not in space or time and because it is constant, it is the core of my being. It is what I refer to as 'myself'.

Max: This whole argument just shows how easy it is for your highly speculative philosophising to go off into fantasy-land. The clock rules in physics and it measures the unstoppable flow of time that sweeps everything along with like corks in a stream. This includes this airport lounge and us.

Orin: The great thing is that when I get tired of arguing with someone who won't listen, I can power myself down, switch off time and travel into the future in utter peace. So, goodnight and only wake me up when the flight is called.

Announcers Voice: We can confirm that Flight 123's delay has now reached the exponential phase. We are happy to announce the flight is now scheduled to leave sometime before eternity. Thank you for your patience.

Max smiles.

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