

## Past and future are *now*

René van Delft – March 2016<sup>1</sup>

Today I want to talk about time. What is that, time?

One philosopher – Saint Augustine, already 1700 years ago – said that he perfectly knew what time was, as long as no one asked him about it. It is obvious, right? We experience it always, every day, every second, how could we *not* know what time is? However, he said: as soon as I want to explain what time is, I am totally lost for words.

At least we know: time can be distinguished in past, present and future.

One of the most fascinating things about time for me is that there is a difference between what you can call ‘neutral’, ‘impersonal’, time on the one hand, and time *as we experience it* on the other hand. The first is very useful for flight schedules and agenda’s, and also for most sciences (physics, history). Sometimes it appears that this is the only way we can think about time.

For this neutral or ‘objective’ sense it is common to display it as a line. Which is odd, because time is *not* space. Still the only way to discuss time seems to be by using spatial metaphors. The words ‘before’ and ‘after’ already include this way of thinking.

On this metaphorical line, you can point to ‘moments’. Just like the ‘slider’ in Youtube or any other movie application. This timeline is uniform, of *one* piece, it is one kind of thing, and you can click on a specific ‘frame’ in a movie first, then click somewhere else. The ‘now’ can be chosen at any random point of the timeline. This is a matter of quantity, the *number* of frames and seconds. Past, present and future are relative here. You can skip and rewind at will.

The other way of looking at time is in the *personal* way, from the perspective of the individual human being. In this case (also, of course, there is a relation between what happened in past, what happens in the present and what will or might happen in the future, but...) these three aspects, or ‘dimensions’, are totally different from each other in nature.

One major characteristic of the past – in spectacular contrast with the future – is that it cannot be changed. Granted: our interpretation and knowledge of the past can change; in this sense the past is not a ‘given’ for once and for all. But in general: the things that happened last year or yesterday cannot ‘un-happen’. Maybe you can undo some *consequences* of what has occurred, but you cannot undo what occurred itself. What happened in the past has happened from that moment on until eternity.

The future has its own specific character: you can guess, plan or predict what you want, but anything that you might be expecting *could* turn out differently. Uncertainty is typical for future events.

The *now* has, again, a completely different nature: what happens *now* floats and passes by, without a possibility to grasp it, to fixate it. You know that most things you encounter on each moment will disappear. Only a few things might be recorded in your memory, on pictures or in writing, but most

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<sup>1</sup> Triggered by an invitation at KLM IMO Commercial department to speak as a philosopher about motivation at work and about sharing.

things you experience will be lost forever. So the present seems – in a way – very vague and ‘unreal’, but on the other hand: what is available in this moment are the only things that are actually real. The rest is only indirectly present in our life, via memories, documents or speculations. The only ‘really real’ thing is, in a sense, what we encounter and do right now.

Let’s focus on these three dimensions. Remember, the most important thing I just mentioned is that these three are very different from each other, in contrast with the uniform concept of time we have when dealing with agenda’s and train schedules.<sup>2</sup>

The ‘now’ is a favorite subject of many mystics and guru’s. They point out that most animals and babies probably experience time in a pure way. And there is indeed something magical in imagining this: to be fully absorbed by the moment, without attention for what has happened or what will come. Being fully aware, without regrets or hopes, just *being* there: breathing, living. Being like a small child, looking with eyes that are not yet filled with prejudice, fully responsive of what is showing itself right in front of you... it is an attractive picture and it has a spiritual value even to be aware of this possibility.

I am not going to say to you that you *should*, as they say, ‘live in the moment’. That’s fully up to you. And I’m not even sure if it would be *wise* to diminish our attention for past and future. All three aspects are valuable. I just want to point out differences and relations between them.

When I started working for KLM, about 17 years ago, I had only had insignificant ‘student like’ jobs. I was only familiar in the world of art – music, literature, philosophy – and I had no idea what it would be to be seriously working for a company at all. I remember sitting in a café with a friend when I told him I would start as a developer at KLM within a month. I was sweating like hell. The only thing I knew about companies was that they were trying to make money. So, I thought: all these people working at companies are only focused on money and nothing else. This must be a collection of sharks that I am letting myself in with. This is a real tough world I am going to enter.

I thought: my life has come to an end. Life as I knew it had stopped.

To my utter surprise, KLM proved to have a culture that was much softer than I had ever encountered. The atmosphere was friendly, many people had a green signature (‘take your environmental responsibility’) and if mistakes were made, people were a bit embarrassed but there was never any punishment involved. Sometimes even I might say: KLM is *too* soft. In reality in general people at KLM are quite open-minded and at ease, and even curious enough to invite a philosopher.

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<sup>2</sup> Actually, it is ‘worse’, I think, as things in the far future are also very different from things in the near future. What happens over billions of years – the burning up of the sun in 5 billion year – has a complete other role in our life compared to what we expect in three hours: what are we going to do for dinner, what are the plans for the evening, for the weekend, for vacation? And the same: the time context of the far past, e.g. the coming into existence of our universe about 13.8 billion years ago, is of a very different nature than what this colleague said to me the other day, what has happened last year with that and that. So actually, I think: time is of a multi-colored richness. But for simplicity’s sake, let’s keep it to three categories: past, present and future.

That was 17 years ago. And 17 years from now I hope to start with my retirement. No idea what my health will be at that time. And though I may expect to be living in the same village as I do currently, there is no way to be sure about that. I don't even know if the KLM will still exist, though we can have high hopes. The past is something I cannot change and my future is partly up to me, and partly up to luck and misfortune.

These two huge collections of things – *what happened* and *what will happen* – are so very different in character, that it seems impossible that they would 'come together somewhere'. But they do. They meet in *the now*. Past and future touch hands, so to speak, in this very moment. That's really amazing. Let's see how these three influence each other and how the human beings are involved with each other through them.

We are connected with our friends, family and colleagues through many past experiences and events. We are connected by our background. For instance by twelve centuries of Holland. And by almost a full century of KLM. Everything we may think of the future, everything we plan (limited to the scope of our possibilities) is based upon what we already know has happened. We know each other and ourselves thanks to what we have seen so far. We have trust in each other – and occasionally mistrust – due to what we remember and what we can find out about the past.

So, the past delivers this bond: our successes and proven vulnerabilities. Awareness of our history gives a sense of value, of what we want to protect or expand.

The concerns that occupy our thoughts are also an important connection. What we intend to do: our projects, our expectations, all these future threats and opportunities, they bring us together. For this we rely on each other's cooperation. Our plans and hopes bundle our mutual energy. This is where the focuses converge and align, where we have overlapping goals. This is the reason we want to share information. And that is a large amount of our job: e-mailing, meeting, calling, producing documents, talking: these are all ways of sharing information in the hope something good will come out of it.

So, the future also binds us together: our strengths and our purposes. Awareness of our future and the importance of our goals are the main trigger of our rationality: our sensibility and common sense.

So far I told you about the difference between *time in a neutral sense* and *time in our experience*, from an individual point of view. In fact it is not only relevant on an individual level, but also on the level of groups, companies and humanity as a whole.

We spoke already about the specific character of past and future. The most magical of the three time dimensions in my opinion is *this very moment*: the 'now' aspect.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The importance of the difference of the several time aspects is what I learned in general from the philosophical tradition that is called *Phenomenology* and especially from the philosophy of Martin Heidegger (1889-1976). Though Heidegger seems to pay more attention to past and future than to 'now'; but no matter the emphasis, the consequences for the meaning of all phenomena in our life are huge.

As said: both past and future are in a sense unreal. The past things no longer exist. The future things do not exist yet. The only thing that is real, concerning our whole life, our whole company, the whole universe, is what is happening right now. As said, this is not *relative*, not a *random* point on a timeline as a collection of an infinity of similar points. This 'now' is unique, and an absolute. There is only one now. And if this split second would not be occurring now, there would be no past, no future, no earth, no me, no you at all. And it is very unlikely that we would be here as we are, we might as well be different or not existing at all.

Let's take a moment of silence to realize that this moment is now happening... As past and future are unreal, they are a bit like dreams, like fantasies. Realizing that this moment is in a sense the only real thing, gives me the sensation of *waking up*... like I have been sleeping for the past 50 years... Realizing this urges me to say: *wake up and stay awake* to myself and sometimes others.

Two aspects of the 'now' always keep inspiring me: the senses and freedom.

I said that past and future connect us, but that's only an abstraction if we ignore the third: this moment. Only in the now, the connection can be concrete, manifest. Only in this second – which in my experience is intimately related with our senses: what we see, feel, hear, smell – something actually happens. So if we do not connect now, in a way: we *never* connect. The senses bind us to space. What is *now* in a fully experienced way, is in large part what we experience *here*: time and space are of a unity. That concrete event is what I personally take as the first meaning of the word 'reality'. That is, I think, why voices in real time, and visuals – real life or through screens – give us generally so much more intimacy than mere documents.

Our thoughts are most of the time occupied with future things: this afternoon, this evening, tomorrow... But all this thinking, all this communicating and trying to improve and share information for future use, they all occur: now. Occupied with all the things we do, we may forget or ignore the fact that we are actually doing them. Occupied with our topics, we may forget or ignore that this occupation is happening here and now.

Shared plans and expectations generate or stimulate the energy of our actions, but the *direction* of this energy is chosen here and now. This very moment is the only moment we are actually able to influence the course of events. This is our only moment of freedom.

Of course we are very limited, we cannot choose to overcome gravity or be in two places at the time. But within reasonable restrictions, the possibilities are infinite. At this moment you could choose to become vegetarian (or stop being it), to stop or start smoking, to end a project or start a new one, to act in a more sustainable way or not, to think of ways to change your life or your company. And we least we can choose to limit ourselves to one thing at the time: focus on what is currently important.

We are what we are due to our past, that's the fuel. We are motivated by the things we want to have in the future: those are possible destinations of our journey. But the steering in the cockpit, the directing itself, can only take place here and now.

We have responsibility for the 'new past events' we are currently creating, we have opportunities for all tomorrow events, and we *can* have awareness of our power right now. Between nostalgia and fears & hopes is the excitement of this moment. It's now or never: if you let the moment pass by without taking notice, you miss out your whole world. This is our life; it is up to us.

I did not give any new information. It is rather obvious and, frankly, a grammatical tautology to say that what actually exists is a matter of presence, a matter of the present. But these thoughts may help us *realize the highly improbable fact that we are*; that we are players and spectators – in sorrow and joy – of this miracle we call existence. And that, to me, is not obvious, but a matter of life and death.

Two views on *time*:

- 1. Neutral (objective)**  
 Time like a 'line', like a youtube video slider  
 Past, future and now have only  
 a difference in **number** of seconds
- 2. Personal (human experience)**  
 Past, future and now have  
 a difference in **nature**

**2. Personal, human time**  
 difference in nature  
 per time-dimension

**Past:** what is given  
**Future:** what is uncertain  
 and gives motivation  
**Now:** the gift of  
 being and of freedom

we share  
 Sense of value, of history  
 Sensibly setting goals,  
 informing each other  
 Sensitivity for pain, love,  
 being and responsibility